

Chapter 35 of Signal in the Sky

Shadow Play

By Purrsia Kat & Spaced Angel

By the next evening, the weather had indeed cleared and proved a few degrees warmer than even the above-average spring temperatures that the Lair computers had predicted. WilyKat sat at the bottom of the steps in front of the Lair watching Leon play a half-hearted game of snarfball with a less-than-enthusiastic Snarf. A brilliant sunset served as their backdrop but even that couldn't life WilyKat out of his own brooding mood.

Part of him felt hopeful the cub would rebound just fine from the death of his father, just as WilyKat and his sister had done the same when they lost their parents at a young age. A lot of that was owed to the other ThunderCats, and WilyKat wanted to be sure he played a part in Leon and Jonca's healing. However, since Leon seemed to be taking the loss more negatively than his sister, Kat made it a point to spend some extra time with boy. But since his recovery was not quite complete, he tired more easily than he would otherwise, so good old Snarf volunteered to keep the game going.

Kat rested and watched the pair, trying to stave off his own guilt for the state of things. For the first time since Lion-O had died before his eyes, WilyKat allowed his mind to retrace his steps that fateful day...



On that day, Kat followed the other Thundercats on the winding path to the Berbil Village, his space board tucked under one arm. Then Cheetara dropped a few paces behind to walk at his side. He had a feeling as to why.

“Like me to turn around and make sure Lion-O doesn't dash off on us?” he offered before she had a chance to say anything.

She looked mildly pleased at his intuitiveness. “In fact, that's exactly what I was going to suggest. I—“

“Had a feeling,” he finished. “Say no more. That's why I brought the space board.”

“And here I thought you only finished your sister's sentences,” Cheetara said with a mild laugh. “I really appreciate this, Kat. I'll make it up to you by bringing home extra Candy Fruit.”

Kat nodded dutifully before hopping on his board and heading back toward the Lair. Sure enough when he arrived he found the Lair empty with the controls set on automatic. Cheetara's feelings

were rarely off the mark, Kat mused grimly. Either something came up to tear Lion-O away from his post, or he was up to something more along the lines of what Cheetara worried about. That having to do with some questionable plan to bring the Mutants or Grune to justice so they could get on with the business of going home.

Kat used the Lair's scanners to get a fix on Lion-O's location easily enough. He could tell Lion-O was headed toward some rarely visited badlands to the far east and wondered what he could be doing out there. They'd never, in all their years, found anything of use or value there. Then, the scanners picked up another mass of energy that was Thunderian in origin and knowing the other Thundercats were at the festival it only meant one thing.

"Grune," Kat muttered, before switching the computers back to autoscan and heading out on his board as fast as he could. If Grune was out there, Lion-O may need his help.

He caught up to Lion-O quickly enough, deciding to hide his space board near where Lion-O had abandoned the HoverCat in favor of going on foot. The terrain was getting rough and he wouldn't have been able to follow Lion-O undetected on the board. Kat concluded Lion-O must know Grune was in the area and likewise didn't want the HoverCat to give away his presence either. That gave Kat some relief. At least Lion-O was aware he wasn't alone.

Cheetara chose Kat as the one to follow for his cunning. Being sneaky, as she had put it, had long been the ThunderTwins' strong suits. Again, he hoped she was right.

WilyKat picked his way through the uneven, rocky terrain. At times he could even see the flame red of Lion-O's mane ahead of him in the distance, only to have it disappear behind the sea of boulders and rock outcroppings that separated the two. Kat was of course mindful that Grune was likely in the area, and all his senses were working overtime to pick up anything unusual should the hunters become the hunted. Surely Lion-O had to be taking the same precautions. There was no other reason for Lion-O to be out in a place like this unless he too had picked up on Grune's presence and came out to confront him.

The only real question was why Lion-O had chosen to do so by himself. Maybe it was a pride thing. Facing and capturing Grune one on one must be a matter of principal in Lion-O's mind. They'd had a rivalry going for years, and perhaps Lion-O thought it best they settle it cat to cat before bringing Grune in to face justice. Either way, Grune was a formidable opponent, even with the odds even, and Kat had to question his leader's sanity.

By now, it was late afternoon and the shadows cast by the boulders were getting long. It was enough to make one do a double take, the paranoid imagination of one on edge conjuring a crouching attacker where there was none. If they lingered until dusk, things were only going to go from bad to worse.

Kat at least had managed to sneak up close enough to keep Lion-O's figure in view almost constantly and noted that he held some sort of device; perhaps something used to track his prize. Lion-O paused a long moment, and surveyed his surroundings in all directions, causing Kat to have to duck behind a rock to keep from being discovered himself.

He was there to assist if things went wrong, but Kat promised himself he'd not treat Lion-O like a child by marching over to him and demanding to know what he thought he was doing. Nor would he humiliate Lion-O by calling the others on his communicator; not before Kat was sure what was going on. But since Cheetara was the one who had pushed for at least tailing the Thundercat Lord, WilyKat thought at least that much should be done.

When he thought it would be safe, WilyKat slowly peeked around the bolder that hid him from Lion-O's view. Now Lion-O had pulled out the Sword of Omens, and Kat could hear him request its powers of sight beyond sight. Only, nothing happened. Lion-O brought the sword down from in front of his eyes and looked it over with puzzlement, and WilyKat too thought that was odd. Clearly, there was some kind of interference in the area. However, if something in the area had crippled the Sword's powers, then surely the warning growl would not sound either.

Kat gulped, the hairs on the back of his neck standing up. Lion-O, clearly annoyed at his tracking device and the Sword of Omens, put both away. WilyKat felt some relief when Lion-O began to return in the direction he'd come from. He was giving up and getting out of there, it seemed, and to Kat it seemed wise enough. When they all got back to the Lair, this would have to be dealt with. This was the second time Lion-O had wandered off by himself and it just wouldn't do. The first time, they'd given him the benefit of the doubt, but now it was clearer what Lion-O was up to. At some point, his luck was going to run out. The Thundercats would have to demand they do this together, as a team or not at all, Kat thought firmly and knew full well Cheetara would agree. But right now, the two of them had to concentrate on getting home unscathed.

Keeping his back tight up against the smooth surface of the boulder, Kat did a little evasive maneuver to ensure Lion-O didn't notice him when he walked by on his way back through. After letting a little distance grow between them, Kat was on the move again.

They'd covered maybe half the distance back to their transports, where the terrain possessed the extra feature of some impressive gorges; impressive enough that Kat wouldn't want to lose his footing and end up at the bottom of one. Some areas only offered a narrow footpath as a means to cross, and they were coming up on one now.

Just when Kat was feeling a little more relaxed, hoping that maybe Lion-O lost track of Grune because the rogue Thundercat was out of the area, Lion-O paused again. Kat thought maybe he'd been discovered when Lion-O slowly turned and glanced in his general direction, causing Kat to dash behind the outcropping he was near. Again, when he felt it was safe, Kat peeked around the corner. Lion-O was no longer looking directly in his direction, but Kat's eyes widened at what came out of the growing shadows behind Lion-O.

Everything seemed to be happening at once and yet in slow motion at the same time. Uncaring of his covert operation, Kat pushed himself into Lion-O's view and shouted.

"Lion-O, behind you!"

Kat saw Grune looming large behind a shocked Lion-O, who had yet to heed Kat's warning and whirl around to see the club Grune held high above his head coming down in a sweeping arc to do its damage to the ThunderCat Lord.

Kat wasn't sure he'd cover the distance in time, but his body pushed him to try.

Shockingly, his momentum was stopped when a tan blur that came from somewhere to the right of Kat, tackling him in the side and knocking him painfully to the rocky, uneven ground.

Kat's thoughts ran wild as he remembered Grune sometimes hung around the Mutants and that they too were here to mount an ambush on Lion-O. If so, the two of them were sorely outnumbered, especially if the Sword of Omens was unable to call the others. He wondered if he'd live to regret his decision not to get on his communicator to the others beforehand.

However, when he got his wits about him, only Grune and Lion-O could be seen quite a distance ahead, struggling. Lion-O had taken the brunt of the first blow on his left shoulder and arm, which had knocked the claw shield off his arm with brutal force. The Sword remained in Lion-O's other hand, and only it and the sheer will of Lion-O to survive were aiding him.

Ignoring his own scrapes and bruises, Kat rose to his feet and tried again to close the distance between him and the dueling pair, calling to Lion-O the whole time. But again, he was hit by some unseen force and found himself hurled hard into a nearby boulder, his arm smashed hard between his body weight and the unforgiving surface of the rock. Kat felt the breath leave him for a moment, falling to his knees and helpless to move. He mentally cursed himself for not using a smoke pellet to hide his advance, but once he got his breath back, he would not make the same mistake twice.

Looking up, he saw that Lion-O was on his feet. This was his chance. Kat worked his way upright, his breath returning to him enough to hopefully manage his next move.

"Lion-O," he called, while using his good arm to toss a pellet in Grune's general direction. "Look out."

As he hoped, Grune was too focused on taking Lion-O out to heed WilyKat's warning as well and was enveloped in the stinging mists of a pellet that rendered the Thunderian temporarily blinded by the chemicals. While Grune cursed, coughed and wheezed, Kat closed the distance between he and Lion-O and the two attempted to make a hasty retreat. The whole while, Kat worried about Grune's unseen assistant. The trouble with employing a smoke pellet now was that they'd come to the narrow footpath. He couldn't be sure that he and Lion-O would be able to see well enough to avoid the steep slopes that bordered the narrow path they had to negotiate first. The bright side was the attacker could only come at them from one direction.

When they were about halfway across, their progress slowed by Lion-O's injuries, Kat tried to use his communicator to call the others. But he found it'd been broken in his struggle against the unseen foe. Lion-O confirmed the Sword would not call the others, which was a further blow to their efforts. They were on their own this time. At least he was able to warn Lion-O that there might be Mutants in the area, too.

Kat looked back and was disheartened to find Grune squinting but determined to pursue. He tried to urge the injured Lion-O on faster, but it was no use. Grune, even with eyes that likely weren't seeing too clearly, was approaching fast. Despite Lion-O's protests, Kat urged him to go on ahead while he went back and stalled Grune.

"No," Lion-O said between haggard breaths. "You're hurt too. We've got to stick together."

Now he was all gung-ho for sticking together, Kat grumbled inwardly. "Just trust me," he said, before turning back toward Grune. Lion-O wasn't the only one who could just decide to do what he wanted.

Grune's derisive smirk grew as WilyKat approached him on the narrow, uneven path.

"Lion-O, sending cublings to do a cat's job?"

Rather than waste time answering the taunt with words, Kat quickly took out his lasso and snapped it around the club Grune held. With all the strength he could muster in his good arm, he gave the line a sharp snap. It brought the weapon out of Grune's hand and sent it tumbling down the steep bank out of reach. The action even caused Grune to lose his balance, and for a moment, Kat thought he'd tumble right after the club. But the big Thunderian righted himself just in time, and with renewed hatred on his face, took wide purposeful strides toward Kat.

It was time to get to safer ground, Kat decided, hoping Lion-O was already there on the other side where the path again widened. He tossed a barrage of pellets back at Grune as he went. But Grune's strides were more than double what Kat's were. Grune easily walked right past oil or ice thrown in his path, and the heavier artillery didn't seem to faze the giant cat. One pellet shot an array of painful darts into Grune where his armor didn't protect him, and the determined Thunderian didn't even flinch.

Kat was holding back his last smoke screen pellet and was glad he did when he turned to find Lion-O lingering on the other side of the gorge. Lion-O had made it but should have kept going. Grune was going to likely catch up to Kat, and there wasn't a lot to be done about that, but Lion-O had to go and get help.

"Lion-O, get out of here!" Kat shouted, throwing the pellet past the Lord of the Thundercats to offer him the coverage to slip into the boulders and make his escape.

No sooner had he done that than a heavy fist found his lower back, pushing him brutally off his feet and carrying him the rest of the way from the narrow path to land in a heap on the other side.

Kat remained conscious and groaned as Grune gave him a swift kick in the side on his way by, sending Kat's battered body sliding into another unforgiving rock formation. Kat looked up and was dismayed to see Lion-O hadn't heeded the chance to slip away and instead emerged from the smoke to face Grune.

He watched helplessly as the two sparred, trading blows with Lion-O inflicting some damage with the blade of the Sword.

“What’s the matter, Lion-O? Can’t call your friends to bail you out this time?” Kat heard Grune say.

Lion-O growled. “I don’t need them to put the likes of you in your place, Grune. Wickedness never pays.”

The laugh that Grune let out sent a chill through WilyKat. “Never say never Lion-O.”

Even without his weapon, with Lion-O hurt and tired, Grune was able to get the upper hand. The agonizing pain in WilyKat’s back prevented him from being able to do anything about it but watch in disbelief.

Grune had Lion-O pinned up against a large rock, his hands closed around Lion-O’s throat. Lion-O dropped the Sword in favor of trying to force Grune to relinquish his grip, but it was to no avail. Grune was going to choke the life out of Lion-O, and Kat had to stop him!

Kat mustered the strength to move, a plan forming in his mind. But in an instant, Grune rendered any move he were to make null. Lifting Lion-O off the ground by his neck, he tossed him back toward the narrow footpath they’d just come from. But instead of falling onto the safety of the path, Lion-O hung for what seemed like agonizing minutes in the air before dropping to the depths below with a strangled cry of surprise.

Kat’s breath caught in his throat as he took in the scene, unwilling to believe that he’d just witnessed this nightmare. Looking up at an exhausted Grune, he bared his teeth and growled low and fierce. Maybe Grune did really just finish Lion-O, and maybe Kat’s moments were numbered as well, but he’d never get them all. And Kat told the sneering Grune so, after finally crawling his way to the fallen Sword and waving it menacingly in Grune’s direction. He wouldn’t go down without a fight, either.

Grune, heaving with exertion and exhaustion, regarded the injured Thundercat with an amused sneer. After having gone to the edge of the gorge to make sure the job was done, he came back to impart a final chilling message to the injured wildcat. “I will spare you. For now. Tell the others they’ll be hearing from me real soon.”

And with that, Grune stumbled away, satisfied enough with what he had done.

WilyKat sat stunned for a long time. Staring at the edge of the precipice, he was sure Lion-O would pop up at any moment hurt but alive and vowing to make Grune pay. Minutes ticked by and only eerie silence reigned with no sign of Grune or the Mutants that probably helped him. Though Kat thought it odd that lot wouldn’t at least make an appearance to grab some credit, or at least claim the Sword of Omens, there was no denying what just happened.

Finally, Kat got to his feet with some effort and staggered to the edge to see for himself. Looking down, he saw Lion-O lying on his back. No movement was detected, nor were there any groans of pain.

No. It couldn't be true. Kat felt panic and dread rising up from the pit of his stomach until it tightened his throat.

"Lion-O!" Kat cried down at the still form below. And yet, there remained no movement, no reply. There was only Kat's voice echoing through the gorge, calling out the name of someone who would never answer.

Even though he knew in his heart the awful truth, he called down, "I'll go get help. Hang on!"

There was no way he could scale down to Lion-O in his condition, the ledge Lion-O rested on was dozens of feet below at best, let alone haul him back up. Kat preferred to cling to the wild thought that Lion-O was just unconscious and could still be saved, leaving Grune to curse having not finished the job. He had to try.

With Sword of Omens held tightly in his grip, it was nearly nightfall by the time Kat made it to his space board. A light mist began to fall from the clouds above leaving him cold in addition to all his other miseries. Unable to stand well on the board, he laid down on it awkwardly and made a flight back to the Lair that would have been comical in some ways had not the circumstances been so dire.

Once he made it back to the Lair, which was closer than the Village, he could finally reach the others. In fact, he only stumbled inside the doors and slapped the Lair alarms on knowing the signal would also go out to any of their communicators that had an open channel. He waited sitting by the door, too drained and shocked to go any further.

WilyKat would never forget their looks of shock when they laid eyes on him or the dread once they realized he was alone and clutching the Sword of Omens. He saw the same stunned realization in their eyes, and yet they too would cling to a thin hope, until they would bring Lion-O's body home and be forced to face reality.

Kit had stayed with him, nursing his wounds, while the others mounted the rescue mission. In the end, it wound up a mere recovery of a body. Life in the Lair had never been the same since. Wickedness had paid. Grune won.



"Feeling better?"

The simple question brought Kat back to the present day. He looked up at his twin sister and at first only muttered something unintelligible in response.

She sat down on the step beside him. "C'mon Kat. Tell me what's going on."

Kat blinked back the tears that had started to form in his eyes from the memories and swallowed hard. Kit had been his most staunch supporter, though nobody really seemed to blame him at all for what happened. Everyone, in fact, seemed to agree that what happened to Lion-O was his own doing - or undoing, if one wanted to look at it that way.

"Same old stuff," WilyKat offered weakly. He really didn't want to get into it again. Thinking back on that fateful day had drained him more than he realized at first.

Kit wrapped an arm loosely around his shoulders, and rather than press him to talk more, she simply rested her head on his arm and watched Leon play with Snarf.

Kat heard the sound of Leon's laughter and it brightened his spirits a little. At least someone around the Lair could forget long enough to laugh. For Kat, there were still too many questions and too many scenarios to second-guess. Every doubt led to a single conclusion: somehow Lion-O's death was his fault.



"Coward!"

A beam of red energy shot out from Mumm-Ra's eyes and scorched up the ground heading straight towards where Tygra stood. All around him, he heard his friends yelling for him to get out of the way, but Tygra held his ground. In his hand, the Sword was growling furiously, like a beast eager to be released from its cage. The beam stopped just short of his feet and Mumm-Ra gazed down at him with puzzlement.

"Perhaps I underestimated you, Thundercat. A lesser individual would have been all too eager to show me his prowess with that pretty toy you hold."

"The Sword of Omens has power enough," Tygra replied. "It is there when and if I need it."

Mumm-Ra chuckled. "You speak for yourself. What of your friends?"

Tygra was a fraction too slow to react as Mumm-Ra's hand came up. He saw the lightning bolt of red energy lash out towards WilyKit. He saw her frightened eyes and the look of terror on her

face in the seconds before the blast hit her and threw her broken body back into the trees with a sickening thud.

“No!”

Tygra sat bolt upright, his eyes opening to darkness. The sheets slithered from his sweat-soaked body and ended up in a limp mass in his lap. He was breathing heavily, as though he had been running for his life, and yet he had not left his bed. Beside him, Cheetara slept soundly, her body moving to the gentle rhythm of her breathing and he surmised that he must not have cried out in his sleep.

It was night, he was in his bed in Cats’ Lair and it had all been just a dream. A very bad dream at that, he had to admit. It had seemed real enough to shake him from his sleep and deprive him of any further rest this night. His ragged breathing was returning to normal and the sweat was drying on his skin to leave him feeling cold and clammy. If he lay down again, he knew he was bound for a restless night of tossing and turning. That would wake Cheetara and she would want to know what troubled him. He would either have to lie poorly or tell her the truth. Neither of those seemed a particularly appealing prospect and, given the choice, he preferred to avoid the situation altogether by getting up. It would mean another day of tiredness and headaches but being awake was preferable to the terrors that patrolled his mind during the night.

Leaving Cheetara to her slumbers, he crept from the room and out into the muted light of the corridor. The Lair was reassuringly quiet and only the faint whirring of the air circulation systems broke the silence. The other inhabitants of the Lair were asleep, including Felina, for as he passed her room, he caught the gentle purr of a snore from behind her door. It was still early days since Lion-O’s death, and Tygra was mildly surprised at how well Felina seemed to be coping. He knew about her nightly tears and was pleased that this night at least she was able to get some rest. Allowing himself a moment’s envy at her peace, he passed on down the corridor and made his way up to the Control Room.

The door opened to admit him into the bright chamber, causing some surprise to its two inhabitants. Bengali and Pumyra looked up guilty from the board game they had set up on the floor and both jumped quickly to their feet.

“I, er, we didn’t expect you,” Bengali said hurriedly, vaguely gesturing to the empty view screen behind him. “We were just--”

Tygra held up an absolving hand. “It’s all right. Anything happening?”

“Pumyra’s just gained control of another galaxy and I’m ten thousand credits down,” he replied, looking dismally to the game at his feet.

Tygra sighed. “Anything happening on Third Earth?”

“Oh, that.” Ignoring Pumyra’s snigger, Bengali turned to the control panel and punched several buttons. A map of Third Earth flashed up on the main screen, reassuringly absent of any warning

beacons. “Nope, nothing.” He turned from the screen and shrugged. “It’s been real quiet now for a while. And it was kinda boring so we--”

“Yes, that’s fine,” said Tygra. There were probably better ways the younger tiger could have filled his time, but Tygra felt in no mood to argue the matter with him. The pair had a conspiratorial gleam in their eyes which made him suspect that more had been going on before he had entered than Pumyra’s domination of the board.

That and the uncomfortable memory of his dream, still vivid in his mind, made him feel strangely lethargic. Arguing with them now would have little impact on the pair. Bengali had been critical of late, whether by intention or design, leaving Tygra to wonder what lay behind his remarks.

Then there was the question why Pumyra was up in the middle of the night. Boring or not, Bengali was more than qualified to handle his stint of guard duty alone. If she too was having trouble sleeping, he felt the need to ask the reason.

“It was warm, and I didn’t feel tired,” came her answer.

Since the temperature outside the Lair had been chilled by westerly winds and she had been hard at work reorganising the Lair’s medical supplies for the better part of a day, Tygra was inclined to disbelieve her. Perhaps he was just being paranoid, he told himself; not everyone doubted his abilities and leadership qualities enough to spend night after night awake worrying about it. Not every member of the Lair was like him.

It did worry him though. If leadership meant only the issuing of orders, he was sure he could have handled that. But leadership of the Thundercats came with added responsibilities. They had yet to be put to the test against a band of marauding Mutants but come that day he knew the other Thundercats would live or die by his command. It was an awesome power and a terrifying responsibility. One mistake could cost one of them their lives and there would be no one to blame but him. How could he ever live with that? Sobering thoughts such as that always made Tygra all the more respectful of the Lords that reigned before him.

Cheetara had been his rock in reassuring him that, while the Thundercats had the Sword of Omens, good would prevail. He wasn’t sure he quite believed that, given what she had told him about her vague feelings of trouble ahead. He believed that she *wanted* to believe in him – whether she did was another matter.

And then there was the question of the Sword of Omens. His first encounter with the weapon had been encouraging. It had received him with a growl of welcome and in the silence of the Sword Chamber, one had explored the other’s abilities. On reflection, Tygra had to wonder who had gained the most from the experience. The power of the Sword had been forceful, demanding more from him than he felt comfortable with giving. He had resisted and in return he had sensed a similar rebuttal to his own investigations. He questioned whether the Sword had been in some way offended and had closed itself to him as he had to it.

Since then, he had found bonding with the weapon difficult. It did not spring as readily to his hand as it had to Lion-O's and its performance had been lacklustre. The others had noticed it, although had been too polite to say anything. Cheetara had assured him that such things took time, which he had interpreted as disappointment. Felina had seemed as though she wanted to say something, but held her tongue. Certainly, it was a problem. A half-hearted weapon and an inept leader did not bode well for the future.

That was if they had a future on Third Earth. Reports had filtered back to Cats' Lair from their scattered allies that the Mutants were bolder and that Grune in particular was making himself a nuisance recently. Word was no doubt getting out, and that would mean their allies would feel vulnerable and unsure while their enemies would become emboldened. Panthro was all for heading out and tackling the traitor head-on, to extract revenge for Lion-O's death and to show their friends they were still strong – they were still the Thundercats, sworn upholders of justice and protectors of the meek. Tygra had won the argument this round, persuading the others that there would be better times to avenge their fallen friend, but he knew that he was losing the battle. Panthro was stirring the others into discontent behind his back and he wondered how long it would be before he was outvoted.

The only thing he could be sure of was that any encounter with Grune now would be disastrous. Not only because of his problems with the Sword, but also because they would head into battle ruled by their emotions. One of the first things that had been drilled into Thundercat trainees was that battles were won as much by the brain as by the fist. Panthro was a Thundercat of high principles and great passion that had more than once landed him in deep trouble. As well-meaning as he was, letting him lead the others down the same path had to be avoided. Tygra had wondered if he had already irredeemably lost Bengali, who was proving to be one of Panthro's most vociferous supporters. It was a concern that would have to be addressed sooner or later, but not tonight.

"Why don't you two head off to bed?" Tygra said, taking Bengali's place at the main consol. "I'll keep watch."

"For what?" Bengali countered, that critical edge Tygra had noticed from before creeping back into his voice. "There's nothing out there."

"Well, there will be eventually."

Bengali folded his arms and proved to be stubbornly obstinate about leaving. "And who are we expecting? I thought Grune was too busy crowing about the fact he killed Lion-O to worry about us."

His expression matched the vehemence he had injected into his words. It was too late for this, Tygra thought.

"Go to bed," he ordered sternly. "We'll talk about this in the morning."

"Why not now? Grune killed Lion-O and we did nothing about it."

“We will.”

“When? The longer we wait, the weaker we look.”

Tygra shook his head, hearing Panthro’s words coming from the younger tiger’s mouth. “Not necessarily, Bengali.”

“Oh, really? It looks like we’re afraid of him, Tygra. Are we?” He paused for a heartbeat. “Are *you*?”

Tygra rounded on him. “How dare you say that! What do you know?”

Bengali stared defiantly back at him. “Because I’m the new boy? After all these years, you’ve never really accepted us, have you? And now we’ve got a voice around here, you don’t like it.”

“Bengali, don’t,” said Pumyra, stepping between the two. “Now isn’t the time.”

He shoved her aside. “Then when is? I will be heard!”

“Then speak,” Tygra said. “You think you could do a better job of leading the Thundercats?”

The glow intensified for a fraction of a second in Bengali’s eyes, only to die away when he shook his head. “No, I don’t. You are the natural choice. It’s just that you’re so damned pig-headed, Tygra. You ask for our opinion, but you never listen. You have your own ideas, and you stick with them. We might as well not be here for the notice you take of us.” He sighed. “I’d like to think that I’m not just the guy who mends the Sword whenever it gets broken around here.”

It had been brutal, but it had been honest. As aware as he was of his shortcomings, even Tygra had not realised all the ways he had been failing. He saw the situation from a logic-ordered distance; it had protected him from the worse of admitting how deeply Lion-O’s death had affected him. Perhaps if he had been as honest with himself as Bengali had been with him, then he would have understood this need to act long before now.

“Is this how you feel too, Pumyra?” he asked her.

She hesitated before nodding a little reluctantly. “I’m sorry, Tygra. Lion-O was a good friend. To do nothing feels as though we are betraying his memory.”

“Thank you for your honesty,” said Tygra. “Now I understand, we can plan our counter-attack.”

“Plan?” said Bengali. “What’s there to plan? Let’s just get out there and do something!”

“Like rush headlong to our own deaths, you mean?” Tygra frowned. “You’re right, I do have my ideas about how things should be done. I’m Lord of the Thundercats; the title gives me that right, because I am responsible. Whatever we do, we must ensure that we survive to continue Lion-O’s

legacy. My lordship will not be bloodied by headstrong youths intent on righting a wrong at any cost.”

Bengali glared at him and it was left to Pumyra to diffuse the situation.

“He’s right, Bengali. There’s nothing to be gained if we get ourselves killed or violate the Code in the hold of emotion.”

“Now go to bed and get some rest,” Tygra ordered them, grateful that at least Pumyra was somewhat reasonable. “If we’re going to go chasing after Grune, we’ll need everyone to be rested and alert.”

“Are you including yourself in that?”

“I’ll manage. Go. You’ve given me plenty to think about.”

The pair reluctantly obeyed and filed in silence out of the Control Room. Tygra settled into the empty seat and stared thoughtfully at the undulating map of Third Earth on the main screen. There were a thousand places to hide and a thousand more in which to be ambushed. Going out looking for trouble had all the appeal of walking into Mumm-Ra’s Pyramid and hammering on the old devil’s sarcophagus. There were too many variables, too much that could go wrong. Lion-O had certainly learned that lesson the hard way. Repeating his mistake seemed unwise to Tygra, and pig-headed or not, he was loathe to relent his position on the matter.

Not that those kind of considerations had ever seemed to worry Lion-O. He had been headstrong and reckless, but above all he had been courageous. A little thing like failure had never occurred to him, let alone stopped him. Tygra wondered if his illusions had been wrecked in those final moments as his life had slipped away. He hoped not. He hoped it had been quick to spare Lion-O the disappointment. Had he lived, would he have been the same? Probably, Tygra thought to himself. Lion-O had been the eternal optimist, seeing opportunities where others saw only stumbling blocks. He’d almost met his end many times before Grune got the better of him, and remained bold as ever right up to the end.

The end, when one day he had stumbled. The Sword of Omens and the leadership of the Thundercats had passed to another. Shame he had not inherited his optimism too, Tygra reflected. In situations like these, Tygra doubted whether Lion-O would have found anything to be glad about. No doubt he would have come up with something. Or perhaps he would have thrown himself into the task with vigour and little thought to the consequences. That approach certainly had its advantages. It was possible to be too prepared, after all. Give something too much thought and it was easy to be talked out of acting on any situation.

Not that he could find any good reason for not acting now, because the truth was a key difference between Lion-O’s tragedy and their plan was they were going to seek out Grune together, not alone. Bengali was right. The longer the Thundercats failed to respond to this attack on their previously impervious position, the further they would fall in the eyes and in the respect of Third Earther and Mutant alike. He knew that, and still he hesitated. Had Bengali been right about

something else too? Was he really afraid of Grune? He wished he could have answered that question with a hearty denial, but truth be told, Bengali had hit a raw nerve. He had no fear of confronting him as a Thundercat, but as *Lord* of the Thundercats was something different. Lion-O had been happy to make himself a target, placing his faith in the Sword of Omens, but as matters now stood between weapon and wielder, Tygra found he did not share Lion-O's confidence.

With that thought, Tygra sank back into the chair and closed his eyes. As Cheetara was fond of telling him, he was not Lion-O nor did anyone expect him to be. Lion-O had done things his own way, and so must he. The others might not like it, but he would be the one who had to live with the consequences of his actions. After all, Lion-O had been killed doing things his way. His approach had proved to be all too fallible.

So, if action were what the others wanted, then action they would get, but it would be on his terms. Tomorrow he would call a council meeting and they would discuss the situation rationally and make their plans. They would prepare for all eventualities and act accordingly. After that, their fate would be in the hands of the gods.

Tygra could only hope they would look kindly upon his efforts. The Lair had seen enough sadness to last it a lifetime. He was determined it would see no more under his lordship; either that or die trying. Trouble was he had the sneaking suspicion it was fast coming to that.

The Lair's alert sensors brought Tygra out of his grim thoughts with a start. His heart's pace slowed once more when he observed the approach of Willa and Nayda on the monitors and made his way downstairs to greet them. He hoped nothing serious was bringing them out to the Lair at this time of night.

Their expressions were serious when Tygra opened the door to greet the pair. "Ladies, good evening," he said, doing his best not to sound panicked. "Please, come inside."

He stepped aside, allowing the pair to dutifully file into the shelter of the Lair and out of the crisp spring night.

Willa turned and looked at Tygra levelly. "Sorry to bother you so late, but we didn't feel this should be done over a monitor."

Tygra managed a thin smile of reassurance. "You haven't disturbed me. Someone's always on watch here, as I'm sure you know. What can I do for you?"

"Is it true?" Nayda suddenly blurted. "Has...has Lion-O been killed?"

Willa cast her sister a stern look, before turning back to face Tygra. "We came to offer our condolences and assistance, that is, if such awful news is true."

Tygra was sure his expression gave it away well enough, but he went ahead and stated the obvious with a heavy sigh. "Yes. The night of the Berbil festival Lion-O passed on. It's true."

Nayda clasped a hand over her mouth, stifling the sharp gasp that had escaped her lips. For Willa's part, Tygra noticed her eyes moisten and she seemed to have a moment of difficulty finding her voice again.

"We are deeply sorry to hear of it," she finally managed. "Members of our tribe had overheard some Mutants speaking of a deadly confrontation between Lion-O and Grune, and so naturally we didn't want to believe it until we heard it from you." Her eyes fell on the claw shield and the sword sheathed therein, fastened to Tygra's thigh and he knew she realized the implication.

"Yes, unfortunately it's all true. And we suspected that the Mutants had gotten word. It was only a matter of time. I am," he added, gesturing to his newly acquired weaponry, "acting Lord of the Thundercats until Leon comes of age."

He hoped he hadn't sounded too apologetic but referring to himself with that title still seemed unnatural to Tygra, and he wondered if he'd ever get used to it. He could tell the warrior women before him were still absorbing the shock of the news, and he couldn't read in them what their reaction to his announcement truly was.

"The cubs," Nayda interjected. "How are they faring?"

"As well as can be expected. We would have told you ourselves, but we're still in mourning. I hope you understand."

Willa nodded soberly. "Pardon us if we have intruded. But know that we are available for anything you may need, our alliance with the Thundercats unshaken. We'll keep close tabs on the Mutants – and Grune if he can be tracked – and report anything we find back to you."

It did Tygra a world of good to know the news of his Lordship hadn't effected their status as allies, although he was sure Cheetara would have thought him silly for thinking such a thing in the first place. As he graciously accepted their offer and escorted them back out the door, Tygra knew he had to get a grip on his insecurities, or his doom-and-gloom prophecies would become self-fulfilling.



Lion-O had a lot of time to think on the Astral Plane. And the more he thought about his encounter with Felina, her dream, and the note, the more concerned he became. He'd thought the disturbing turn the dream he'd invaded had taken was the result of her troubled mind, but given some offhand things Jaga had mentioned about that form of communication, he wondered if his presence hadn't sparked a prophetic dream of sorts in Felina. If so, it didn't bode well for those left behind. He knew he had something dire to tell her now, as she surely wasn't aware of its

prophetic potential like he was. Odds were, she'd written it off as well if she even remembered it at all.

But the only one he could really get through to easily was Jonca. However, she couldn't hear him. It was always something! Out of desperation realization dawned, as if parting the astral mists that he wandered, and he chastised himself for not thinking of it before. Because of Velouria, everyone in the Lair was adept at sign language. Of course! He could sign his message to Jonca and ask her to bring it to the others. He simply hoped the message wasn't too scary for his daughter to handle. He didn't want to frighten her, but if trouble lay in the future for the Thundercats and he knew about it, he had to try to warn them as sure as Jaga would have appeared to Lion-O whenever he knew of dangers that lie ahead.

Once again, he willed his spirit back to the familiar halls of Cats Lair, passing by Tygra who was coming down the hall from the Control Room. At this early hour, it was easily assumed that Tygra must have had night watch duties. Lion-O noticed he wore the shield and sword, and also sensed thanks to the extra awareness the astral world bestowed on its denizens, a heaviness and dread in Tygra's heart. But then, given the added responsibility Tygra now shouldered, should it be any wonder?

Lion-O continued on his journey, content to leave Tygra ignorant of his spirit's presence. Not that he could do much about it either way. After some roaming, he found his daughter in the kitchen. Some rustling about could be heard from a pantry adjacent to the room, and Lion-O soon realized it was Snarf causing all the racket when he heard a mild oath amid all the clanging and banging about.

Jonca was sitting on a stool in front of a table where it appeared Snarf had laid out some of the items necessary for preparation of the breakfast meal. She donned Snarf's old chef's hat, and idly played with a ball of dough, causing it to roll from one of her palms to the other.

It took a moment for her to sense his presence, but when she looked at him, he knew she could still see him, and Lion-O couldn't resist flashing a broad grin her way. She visibly brightened, but a quick motion to signify she shouldn't say anything stopped any greeting she may have planned. Given what happened between her and her brother last time he'd appeared, Lion-O thought it best that a scene was not made lest Snarf should come back into the kitchen.

He went about the best way he knew how to get his message out without causing too much alarm. He just hoped the others would listen to her.



Felina had been searching the Lair for one person in particular, finally deciding to confront them for their well-meaning actions. The slip of paper she'd found in her hand after that fitful amount

of sleep the night before had weighed at her mind and nagged her conscience, until she retrieved the crumpled paper from the corner she'd relegated it to, and sought out the good Samaritan she concluded must have left it there.

Rounding the corner into the lounge, she heard Snarf telling someone breakfast was ready. And that someone was just who she'd been looking for -- Cheetara. As she approached, Snarf reiterated his message to her and she responded with a slight nod. But rather than heading back to the kitchen, Snarf seemed content to linger. Felina supposed it didn't matter if he heard what she had to say for she felt she had to get it off her chest before she lost her courage.

"Cheetara, I'd like a word with you," she said, keeping her voice low and even. A glance cast down at Snarf did nothing in the way of hinting it was preferred that this was a private word. In fact, the glance only seemed to pique Snarf's curiosity, as no doubt he sensed Felina's tense mood. And looking at Cheetara's face, Felina knew she was as readable as an open tome.

"Of course. What's troubling you?"

Felina licked her parched lips and offered up the crumpled paper, expecting to see recognition in Cheetara's eyes. Instead, she only saw curiosity mixed with mild confusion in her friend.

"What is it?" Cheetara asked, and Felina listened hard for any trace of feigned innocence in her tone.

"When I awoke from a dream the other night, this had been put in my hand," Felina explained. "It's part of an old note Lion-O wrote to me years ago."

Cheetara took the offered note, flattened it out as best she could, while Felina waited patiently for Cheetara to read it over. Cheetara remained quiet for a moment, while Snarf strained to raise himself up high enough to also read the note.

"It's a beautiful sentiment," Cheetara finally said. "But I don't understand. What does this have to do with me?"

Felina wasn't sure if it was the stress of the recent events, her lack of quality sleep, or any number of other negative factors, but she suddenly found herself working up to becoming quite upset and angry.

"You act as though you don't know."

"I don't."

"Listen, I know you meant well. I really do especially after I carried about hearing him over the radio. And please forgive me for being upset in light of that but I have to be honest; putting the note in my hand as though to remind me that he cared is actually making everything worse." There. She said it. Maybe not as gently or as eloquently as she'd liked, but it was out there.

Cheetara glanced down at the note with puzzlement before surrendering it to a curious Snarf. “I hate to tell you this, but I’ve never seen that piece of paper in my life. If someone was trying to send you message of comfort, it wasn’t me.”

Felina was stunned. She’d thought about it and knew that Cheetara was really the only logical suspect in the matter. Maybe she didn’t know about the notes or where Felina had kept them, but that merely meant she likely had a conspirator. Felina turned her suspicious eyes on Snarf.

“You. You helped her find the note, didn’t you?” That would explain his lingering for the conversation, to Felina’s mind.

Snarf’s head jerked up, his eyes going wide before narrowing at Felina. “I did no such thing. Fine thing, being accused before there’s proof. And at a time like this, like I haven’t got enough to worry about.”

Felina grimaced, in no mood for Snarf’s dramatics. “Then tell me – how did that get in my hand if neither of you were involved.”

Snarf glanced up at Cheetara and shrugged. “Sleep walking?”

Felina scoffed at the notion. “You really think it’s that simple?”

“Sounds simpler than the conspiracy theory you cooked up,” Snarf responded bluntly. “And you’re certainly prone to sleepwalk. You even wandered off when you were in labor with the twins—“

“Enough.” Felina cut him off before he launched into a rehash of that old story. But, he was right, and Felina wasn’t sure if her face was burning more with embarrassment or anger.

Cheetara approached, sympathy shining in her eyes. “Felina,” she began gently, reaching out to put her hands on Felina’s shoulders. “Maybe you need more rest—“

Felina pushed away, resentful that rest was always Cheetara’s universal solution. “Stop telling me what I need.”

As Felina turned to stalk out of the room, she found Jonca standing shyly in the doorway, and her demeanor softened. Felina hoped she hadn’t been standing there long suddenly feeling renewed embarrassment at her own behavior.

The child fidgeted with her tunic as she looked nervously from one adult to the other before speaking. “I need to tell you something, mom.”

Felina went to the girl and knelt before her. “Of course, honey. What is it?”

“I’m worried. Dad said we have to be careful about Grune or bad things are going to happen,” she confided in a rush.

Felina nodded. “Your dad was worried about Grune. He was tracking Grune when he...when he passed on.”

Jonca shook her head. “No, he said this today when I talked to him.”

A strangled note out of Snarf’s throat was the only sound in reaction at first.

Felina swallowed hard, aware of the trouble between Jonca and her brother over supposed sightings of Lion-O’s ghost. It wasn’t beyond belief, she knew, but something didn’t add up. “Jonca, I thought you told the kids you couldn’t hear him when he appeared.”

“I can’t,” she admitted. “But he started talking like Velouria does today and that’s what he told me I had to tell you.”

Jonca looked so earnest it broke Felina’s heart. She didn’t believe Jonca could really see Lion-O’s spiritual form. Rather, she chalked it up to a child’s vivid imagination coupled with wishful thinking. It didn’t make sense for him to burden a child with something that ominous, Felina concluded. The fact that the ‘warning’ mentioned Grune struck Felina as a manifestation of the child’s anxiety from the manner in which Lion-O had died. Of course, the girl would fear the one who took her father from them. That’d explain the content of the message, anyway.

Jonca scowled in response to Felina’s gentle smile. “You don’t believe me.”

Felina didn’t have to say it. Her piteous expression conveyed everything child suspected. “Run along to breakfast. We’ll talk about it afterward.”

“I’m not hungry,” Jonca muttered before leaving.

Felina felt horrible, but she saw no value in humouring the child by entertaining her fantasies about her dead father. She turned, looking to Cheetara and Snarf for support but the duo simply looked shell shocked from the revelations, Cheetara in particular.

“You don’t think she sees him, do you?”

Cheetara bit her lip and looked away, which made Felina feel uneasy. Cheetara wrapped her arms around herself and shivered. “It’s cold in here,” she remarked before adding a trailing comment about seeing everyone at breakfast and making an altogether awkward exit.

Snarf had his own exiting commentary to add as he followed Cheetara out, past Felina. “We all need a shrink.”



In the heart of darkness, nothing stirred. No breeze dared penetrate the thick stone walls of the mighty pyramid. No spider chanced to construct his web on the cold, silent statues. Time passed and, beyond its walls life moved on, grateful that the most potent force for evil that Third Earth had ever seen was stilled and locked in his tomb.

Then, one day, a slight bump appeared in the thick viscous surface of the cauldron. It grew into a bulge, as the pressure of the air beneath forced its way to the surface. Finally, with an impressive pop, it burst, releasing its foul odours into the air. Seconds later, another bulge appeared, and it too added its stench to the growing miasma in the air. Others hurried to follow this lead until the surface of the cauldron was a boiling mass of escaping bubbles. Fluid slopped over its sides and wetted the towering statues of the Ancient Spirits of Evil. The smell of static electricity added to the stink as lightning crackled in the space between the statues. From silence into chaos, the pyramid came back to life and with it came Mumm-Ra, the Ever-Living.

He emerged from his sarcophagus a withered wrecked. And like an insect stretching its wings after escaping its cocoon, so too did Mumm-Ra extend his arms to the unseen heavens and beseech his evil masters for their powers. Lightning struck him and invigorated him, inflating his decayed limbs until his body was restored.

He surveyed himself with some interest, recapturing the memory of powers that seemed now more intense. His physical body felt and looked larger, stronger. His imposed rest had clearly done him no harm. While he had been forced to hide away in his sarcophagus, the Ancient Spirits had recharged his powers, making him feel more alive than he had in years. A strange choice of words, he thought with a chuckle, but then it had been many years since he had 'lived' in the real sense of that word. Years had gone by without him, he sensed. Years the Thundercats had taken that from him. But now he was back, and his thoughts turned to his enemy.

He watched the events of the past ten years replay in the seething waters of his cauldron. Mostly, it was an endless litany of failure on the Mutants' part, with only that wretch, Grune, showing any promise. While they floundered, the Thundercats had thrived. He saw Cats' Lair filled with annoying, noisy brats, Lion-O's spawn and heirs. He saw the people of Third Earth happy and troubled by only occasional inconveniences. He saw a world without him, a world that had been pleased to forget him. That was their mistake, and they would pay, he resolved. First would be Lion-O and his disgusting friends. Then the rest of Third Earth would remember Mumm-Ra and pay him the homage and respect that he was owed.

Except to his growing fury, he saw that Grune had beaten him to it. He saw the battle, where one walked away while the other died. He saw the Thundercats' grief for a fallen leader and the one who took his place. The pyramid shook to Mumm-Ra's roars of outrage at being denied his revenge and the walls took the impact of his rage made into raw energy.

Only when the storm had passed did calm reason take its place. Grune unwittingly had helped him. He had denied him the satisfaction of taking Lion-O's pathetic life for himself, but in doing so, he had created the ideal situation for Mumm-Ra's return to power. As far as he could see, the Thundercats had taken to hiding in Cats' Lair, while Grune rubbed his victory in their faces. He could see the Thundercats now, gathered in their council room, discussing their next move. It

was no surprise to him that Tygra had been promoted to the lordship. He was no Lion-O, however. From what Mumm-Ra remembered, he was happier being led than leading. If Lion-O had put his faith in action, then Tygra was a born planner. That would be his undoing.

Listening to their plotting now, about the best way to ambush Grune when he was at his most vulnerable, Mumm-Ra smiled to himself as the seeds of a plan of his own began to germinate in his mind. All it needed was a little careful thought and the co-operation of that band of degenerates at Castle Plun-darr. He would have to include Grune of course; his ego would not permit itself to be overlooked. As much as he hated him for denying him the joy of crushing Lion-O, Mumm-Ra knew he was useful. When the time came that Mumm-Ra no longer needed him, then he would take his revenge. For now, however, he was going to prove invaluable. The Thundercats always bragged that it was their teamwork that allowed them to beat the odds. Well, Mumm-Ra considered that it was time the darker forces on Third Earth tried a little genuine cooperation.

With laughter that echoed through the empty chamber, Mumm-Ra rose up into the air and spiralled towards the small opening at the very top of the pyramid. A time of change was coming for all on Third Earth, he thought to himself, and the Mutants were going to know about it first.



Even in the middle of the day, the heady smell of ale was thick on the air that escaped the claustrophobic interior of the Balkan Bar. Tygra emerged from the trees to take up position opposite the inn door as the sounds of carousing from inside grew louder. The singers emerged in high spirits and beery fumes, laughing and waving empty tankards in the air. The figure in the centre of the group, the person Tygra was waiting for, reeled from side to side, bumping into his drinking companions and slopping the dregs of his drink over their heads.

“Grune!” Tygra called to him.

The drunken gathering came to an abrupt halt and bloodshot eyes squinted in his direction. Several of the crowd fell senseless to the floor, leaving Grune to face this challenge alone. He surveyed Tygra with a calm appraising stare, his eyes now alert and keen and all trace of drunkenness banished. Where Tygra had been hoping for the advantage that Grune’s intoxication might give him, he realised he was about to be disappointed. Grune could clearly hold his liquor better than his unconscious companions.

A smile slowly crept across Grune’s lips and his gaze switched to the individual who lay sprawled at his feet. “You owe me five Berbil dollars, Rancus,” Grune said, prodding the insensible body with his toe. “I said they would put in an appearance sooner or later.” His attention came abruptly back to Tygra. “I just didn’t expect it to take so long.”

“And now I’m here.”

“So you are.” Grune sneered. “With Lion-O’s little sword in your hand too. How mighty you must feel, Tygra. The question is, do you know how to use it?”

“Well enough,” Tygra replied. “We have business, Grune. You killed Lion-O.”

He grinned. “So, I did. One of the most satisfying days of my life, I have to confess. He’d been spouting some idiotic platitudes about how ‘wickedness never pays’ and it was my greatest pleasure to shut him up for good. He lingered for a long time, long enough to know that I had won!”

The undergrowth suddenly parted and Panthro joined them in the clearing. Grune’s smile broadened, pleased that his goading had had the desired effect.

“Two against one, eh?” he said. “That hardly seems fair. Lion-O faced me like a man, alone. But then...” He looked Tygra up and down. “You’re not Lion-O, are you?”

“We’re here to arrest you for Lion-O’s murder,” Tygra said calmly, ignoring Grune’s calculated insults. He would get no satisfaction out of him if he expected him to give into a fit of fury.

“At least this time I’m charged with a murder I actually performed. Thanks for getting it right this time,” Grune replied with a snort. “As for arresting me, you’re welcome to try. Don’t be shocked if I resist.”

“You will be handed over to Mandora of Control for trial and whatever punishment is seen fit.”

Grune roared with laughter. “How very brave of you. Control? Mandora? I’m shaking in my boots.”

“Surrender or we will use force,” Tygra went on. “Those are our terms.”

Grune’s Thundranium club suddenly appeared in his hand. This one looked newer – and bigger – than his old one. “And these are mine,” he said, slapping the weapon in his palm. “You can live as my slaves or you can die here and now!”

“I don’t think so,” said Tygra. A slight gesture of his hand was enough to bring the other Thundercats out into the open. “You see I brought some more friends.”

Grune looked from one face to another in the armed line-up of Thundercats. “Funny you should say that, Tygra,” he said, his smile never wavering. “So did I.”

The door of the inn crashed open and an army of Mutants came charging out, led by Slithe and a grumbling Vultureman.

“Well, Thundercats,” Grune said challengingly, “you want to take me prisoner, go ahead, *if* you can.”

“We can and *will*,” said Panthro. “You think this bunch of reprobates will save you? They’ll run like the cowardly dogs they are.”

Grune nodded. “Why don’t we see?”

With a roar, he raised his club and the assembled Mutants yelled in return. They threw themselves at the Thundercats with a vicious war cry, weapons waving wildly. In the heaving throng, Tygra was separated from the others, hemmed in by a group of six reptilians led by Monkian.

“Hoo-hoo, I’m going to enjoy this!” the ape jeered. “Why don’t you hit me with your little sword, Thundercat?”

Tygra willingly obliged. The flat of the blade sent the ape reeling into two of the reptilians and all three ended up in an untidy heap on the floor.

“Not bad sword fighting for a novice, eh?” Tygra asked his unresponsive opponent. Tygra still preferred his whip, but he thought he wasn’t doing too bad with the new weapon, all things considered.

Two other mutants pounced and crashed into each other as Tygra nimbly stepped out of their way. Another reptilian rushed him with a raised axe only to crumple as Tygra’s elbow connected with his sizable gut. That left one reptilian, whose uncertain expression told of his indecision about whether to fight or flee. Wisely, he chose to flee, as were the rest of his comrades.

In the background, Grune was shouting at them to keep fighting, but the battle was clearly over. Seeing his chance fading fast, Grune threw himself at Tygra. The club smashed into the soil as Tygra managed to dodge the deadly blow. He retaliated with a punch to Grune’s jaw with the full weight of the Sword of Omens behind it. Grune staggered back, bumping into Slithe and knocking the reptilian to the ground. With a savage oath, Grune charged again and their weapons locked. Strength against strength, Grune was winning by degrees and Tygra was being forced down to his knees. The spike of the club came within inches of his face, his wrist slowly being bent back. The Sword spun away from his hand with Grune emerging triumphant from their struggle.

“I’m going to kill you, Thundercat,” said Grune, “just as I killed Lion-O. Just as I’ll kill anyone else who tries to take his place. Any final words?”

“Yes!” came a familiar voice. “Why don’t you shut up!”

Grune’s eyes abruptly closed tightly shut and he buckled at the knees. Standing behind him, Panthro swung one arm of his nun-chunks nonchalantly over his shoulder and grinned down at Tygra.

“Close thing, huh?”

“I was getting the better of him,” Tygra replied, accepting his offer of help getting to his feet.

Panthro nodded, his smile broadening. “Why don’t you try calling the Sword to your hand next time? I might not always be around to save your scrawny hide.”

He headed back into the fray, efficiently dispatching Mutants into unconsciousness with well-aimed blows. Tygra smiled to himself, acknowledging Panthro’s assessment that he had indeed forgotten that aspect of the Sword’s powers. He called for it now and waited with hand extended for it to come to him. When nothing happened, he sighed, berating himself about his failure to bond with the weapon and looked round to locate it for himself.

The reason for its delay was towering and malevolent. Several yards away, Mumm-Ra stood with his foot on the Sword of Omens, pinning the furiously glowing weapon to the ground. In the confusion, Slithe had taken this as a signal to leave and was rallying his followers. Gathering up the still unconscious Grune, they fled into the forest, leaving the battle to Mumm-Ra.

“You lost something?” he sneered, when the clearing had emptied of people. He lifted his foot and the weapon flew straight to Tygra’s hand. “You should be less careless with your toys in future, Thundercat.”

“Mumm-Ra,” Tygra breathed, acutely aware of how alone they were now that the Mutants had fled. He was also quite aware of how much taller and muscular Mumm-Ra appeared. At first, Tygra thought that maybe it had been so long since their last face-to-face encounter that he’d simply forgotten how imposing the mummy’s everliving form could be. But no, something was different.

“Yes, indeed,” he replied. “I have returned.”

“So, you have. What do you want?”

The question was redundant given their past history but stalling for time seemed like a good idea.

“Revenge,” came the inevitable reply. “That and the accursed stain of the Thundercats wiped forever from my world.”

“*Your* world?” said Tygra. “Since when?”

“Since forever!” Mumm-Ra roared. “I surely have more claim to it than you lot of do-gooders and interlopers. For all the years past and for all the years to come, Third Earth is mine!” His red glowing eyes narrowed. “You think you can stop me taking back what is mine, Thundercat?”

“We have before, and we will again.”

Mumm-Ra snorted. “Ah, but that was when Lion-O was alive, and you were younger. Are you his equal, Tygra?”

It wasn't a complete shock to Tygra that Mumm-Ra knew of Lion-O's death. He always seemed to have a way of knowing about things he otherwise shouldn't. “Enough to deal with you.”

Mumm-Ra's eyes glittered as he rose up into the air, his arms spread wide. “Then show me. In fact, show us all, Lord of the Thundercats.”

Tygra glared at him, wanting with all his heart to wipe that smug expression from the demon's face. Instead, he lowered the Sword.

“No. Because you want it too much.”

“Coward!”

The beam of red energy shot out from his eyes and scorched up the ground heading straight towards where Tygra stood. All around him, he heard his friends yelling for him to get out of the way, but Tygra held his ground. In his hand, the Sword was growling furiously, like a beast eager to be released from its cage. The beam stopped just short of his feet and Mumm-Ra gazed down at him with puzzlement.

“Perhaps I underestimated you, Thundercat. A lesser individual would have been all too eager to show me his prowess with that pretty toy you hold.”

“The Sword of Omens has power enough,” Tygra replied, an eerie sense of déjà vu setting in. “It is there when and if I need it.”

Mumm-Ra chuckled. “You speak for yourself. What of your friends?”

Tygra was a fraction too slow to react as Mumm-Ra's hand came up. He saw the lightning bolt of red energy lash out towards WilyKit. As in his dream, he saw the look of alarm on her face and the surprise in her eyes. He was too far away to reach her and even as he called out he knew what the ending would be.

Except this was not a dream. Nimble as ever, WilyKit flipped neatly out of its way. The bolt impacted harmlessly on a tree. Mumm-Ra prepared to fire again, but the Sword of Omens had its own ideas about that. Tygra felt it pulling his arm up and guiding his hand. It glowed white hot in his unprotected palm as its energy was released. The blast threw Mumm-Ra back some fifty feet where he landed on his feet with his chest smoking. He regarded Tygra with narrowed eyes and then lifted off again, heading up ever higher until he had vanished from sight.

“You did it!” WilyKit whooped. “You put that old mummy to flight, Tygra.”

“Perhaps.”

“What are you talking about?” said Panthro, clapping him on the back. “That was a knock-out performance.”

Tygra shook his head. “It was too easy. He let me win.”

“Why would he do that?” This time it was Bengali who spoke. “He’s never shown us that sort of consideration in the past.”

“He was testing us, or to be more precise, he was testing *me*,” said Tygra.

“And he saw you could handle yourself,” said Panthro. “What’s the problem?”

Tygra glanced down at his reddened palm, raw from the heat that had pulsed down the Sword’s hilt. He could see now why Lion-O usually donned the Claw Shield before handling it. Too many episodes like that would deprive him of the use of his hand altogether.

“The Sword did it, not me.”

“What do you mean?” Cheetara asked. “We all saw you--”

“The Sword guided my hand. I was slow to act.”

“Does it matter?” said Panthro. “The end result was the same.”

“Mumm-Ra saw. The next time he’ll be ready.”

Panthro ground his fist into his palm. “And so, will we. Bring it on!”



Back at the Lair later that evening, the overall mood was lighter than it had been in some time. Its denizens were riding high on their first victory with a new leader. Survival seemed within their grasp once more. Even Tygra’s mood had lifted, Cheetara noted from where she studied him from her seat across the council table. The post-battle meeting had broken up, and only they remained behind.

Cheetara wished she could say the same for her own mood, but her sixth sense nagged at her more than ever before since Jonca had blurted Lion-O’s message from beyond earlier that day. It actually made perfect sense to Cheetara that Jonca perhaps could see her father when others could not. They had a special bond in life and from the beginning Cheetara had sensed their fates were intertwined. In light of that, Cheetara had pushed the notion of not underestimating Grune, even as they’d just sent him and Mumm-Ra packing. Mumm-Ra, she believed more and more,

should not be their main focus, though his reappearance and apparently beefed-up status were surely untimely and troublesome, too. But Jonca's message reinforced Cheetara's feelings that it was a mistake to take their total focus off Grune.

Unfortunately, when Cheetara had tried to talk privately with Jonca after breakfast, alone so the risk of further irritating Felina would be at a minimum, it was for naught. The girl had changed her story by then, claiming she'd made it up to get attention and that she was sorry for upsetting everyone. She would speak no more on the matter. But Cheetara suspected otherwise, even going to Velouria to see if Jonca confided in her. But that too, was to no avail. Jonca was, it seemed, unwilling to share her experiences with the others and Cheetara couldn't really blame the girl. Still, the silence couldn't come at a worse time.

And now here she sat, with her husband in an empty council chamber, trying to think of how to broach the deeper meaning of her remarks in the meeting without flagging his delicate confidence as the new leader. It could very well be, Cheetara knew, one of those things fate had in store and no matter what one did there was no stopping things from taking the shape they were meant to take. In fact, sometimes knowing made one over-prepare and ironically the inevitable was rushed into reality. It left Cheetara wondering if she should say anything at all. But then, she would be left with her own guilt just as she was regarding Lion-O's demise.

The whole quandary made her head throb, and she rubbed her temples to try to soothe away the ache. Tygra, it seemed, took notice.

"Cheetara, are you alright?"

She looked up to see he'd paused in his task of straightening a stack of papers to regard her with concern.

She nodded and smiled weakly. "I'll be fine. You certainly seem in better spirits."

Tygra nodded. "I am. I'm still worried about the Sword and my bond with it, but today could have turned out much worse."

That brought another issue to Cheetara's mind. Back in the early days of Lion-O's relationship with Felina, she'd felt strongly that their collective survival hinged on the two of them bonding. Obviously, the relationship failed to flourish and thrive romantically, and yet the Thundercats remained a solid team. Cheetara had thought that perhaps she'd been wrong or misread the feeling. But just as Tygra spoke, understanding dawned in her. The feeling wasn't about Lion-O and Felina at all but about bonds, or more accurately, the lack of a strong enough one to sustain something. Cheetara's stomach dropped and she grimaced, the meaning adding further urgency to the other issues at hand.

Tygra's brow wrinkled again with concern. "Cheetara, what is it?"

She was sure it wasn't Tygra's fault, this weaker bond with the Sword. And she hesitated to explain worried that's exactly how he'd take it. From what she knew, the strength of the ties

between the Lord and the Eye varied for a number of reasons. It was usually at its weakest when a new Thundercat took the title, so the timing for Tygra wasn't that great to begin with. Although, in cases such as with Lion-O, the bond was stunningly strong from the start, almost overwhelmingly so, and it was something Lion-O had struggled with throughout his Lordship. Commanding such power, learning when to apply it and how much to use was a challenge for Lion-O, let alone his worries that the Sword was so connected to him that he was losing his own identity to it.

Back then, during the Exodus, having such a natural wielder of the Sword was a timely blessing. At least that's how Cheetara had viewed it. Now, Cheetara feared, the opposite was going to haunt them through no lack of Tygra's effort. They'd even tried, with the help of the Book, to hasten the link between Sword and bearer, and it did seem to help some but possibly not enough. Where circumstances aligned before to help them triumph in bleak hours, it seemed things were lining up to work against them when they most needed every advantage they could muster. And with Mumm-Ra back in the game, powerful as ever if not more so, Lion-O really couldn't have died at a worse time.

"Cheetara?" Tygra prompted, urgency rising in his tone.

"I – I'm sorry. It's just—"

Before she could add more, Felina came back into the room with the Book of Omens clutched to her chest.

"Good, you're still here," she said more to Tygra than to Cheetara. Felina took a seat between the two and set the Book down in front of her on the table. She seemed oblivious to the fact that she'd obviously interrupted them.

"Can I help you with something?" Tygra asked.

"Actually, the book can help US with something," Felina began, and to Cheetara, she looked a little too wild-eyed for her liking. "No offense to you, Tygra; proved yourself to be a fine leader today. But, I knew there was something in the Book about the dead and bringing them back—"

Cheetara held up a hand to halt the rambling woman. "Wait, you're not suggesting --"

"We can bring Lion-O back, yes." Felina placed her hands over the cover of the Book and sighed with self-satisfaction.

Cheetara eyed Tygra to see if he had any idea what Felina was talking about, having studied the Book as well for many years now, and was shocked to find some dawning realization on his face.

If her temples were pulsing before, they were screaming in protest now. "Hold on, if we could always just cast a spell and resurrect people why haven't we brought back the likes of Jaga? Claudis? Name a deceased ThunderCat." She reasoned. "There's got to be a catch."

And apparently there was, because the twinkle of inspiration in Tygra's eye was promptly extinguished by Cheetara's logic. "There is," he admitted. "A few big ones. Felina have you thought this through completely?"

Felina looked positively shocked and offended. "Of course, I have. Well, other than working out who's going to be the sacrificial soul."

It struck Cheetara how casual Felina sounded about what seemed like a huge detail. Words failed Cheetara, her jaw remaining slack. Granted, the woman had been through a lot, as they all had, and grief could take anyone on a wild emotional roller coaster ride, but anymore Cheetara was inclined to coax Snarf into slipping something in Felina's drink so the poor thing could sleep off whatever madness grief over Lion-O's death was bringing on.

"And what of the fact that a Lifting of the Dead has, as far as any records we can find, never been performed before?" Tygra added. "I'm sure there's good reason for it, even though I'm just as sure many a fine Thunderian who died before his or her time was fervently wished alive again by those who loved them."

"I know," Felina said dismissively, "but I did a Lifting on Cheetara that one time, remember?"

Cheetara didn't have much recollection herself of that ordeal but had been told about the miracle Felina performed in her early days with them, snatching Cheetara back from the brink of death.

"But, I wasn't dead," Cheetara pointed out, causing Tygra to smile.

"I was just going to say that. Felina, I think that's like comparing apples and oranges. You said yourself back then that once someone is dead, it's a different ordeal altogether."

Felina bit her lip. "Don't you two want Lion-O back? Does it really matter the cost?"

Cheetara felt a shiver go up her spine for she didn't like the direction the conversation was taking. "It sounds like the cost is awful high."

"It is," Tygra confirmed. "Two people have to use the book and sword and recite the proper passages. The problem is, one will remain and the other, the sacrificial soul she mentioned, is destroyed. And from what I've read, destroyed on all levels of existence. No misty astral beyond for them. That notwithstanding, it's powerful magic – stuff the ancients were never desperate enough to risk given the far-reaching repercussions were too unpredictable. Who knows, for instance, what happens to a departed soul when it's reunited with its body again? It's got to be traumatic, and probably violent. We might get Lion-O back, but who knows in what mental or physical condition, and another of us would be lost for all time. Too risky."

"Lose one to bring back another..." Cheetara frowned. "Who would volunteer for something like that?"

Felina drew in a deep breath and looked at them with eerie resolve for what she was about to say. “I would.”

“No,” the couple responded in unison.

“Absolutely not,” Tygra added with firm authority.

“Wait, listen. I know what I’m doing,” Felina turned to Tygra, her voice thin and desperate. “You know the spell, I know the sacrificial spell. All you have to do is put the Sword on the Book and say it with me and we have Lion-O back, just like it should be. You don’t have to worry about being Lord of the Thundercats, the kids have their father back – it’s perfect. His life, it means more than any of ours.”

Cheetara’s jaw went slack again. This was not the talk of a sane person. “Felina, we know you miss him. We all miss him. But this is not a good solution. Your kids need their mother, too. He’s gone. We have to learn to go on without him.”

“Ok,” Felina conceded, “it’s not a perfect plan but it’s something. And other than the kids, I’m not needed around here. The book’s knowledge has been passed on. It’s really the only way. I’m the obvious choice. We owe him this much, seems we failed to protect him. Isn’t that what we promised him? What you all said you promised my father on the journey here?”

Cheetara had heard enough. She rose, grabbing Felina by the arm and forcing her to her feet, putting an abrupt end to Felina’s rambling justifications of her suicidal madness. “Keep the Book and the Sword away from her until she comes back to her senses,” she told Tygra, despite Felina’s strident protests. Tygra took the Book into his possession as Cheetara led Felina out of the Council Chamber.

“Where are we going?” Felina demanded.

“You’re having a nice calming, hot drink,” Cheetara informed her, truly intent on putting something a little extra in it from Pumyra’s medical cabinet. “And you’re going to get your head clear of this nonsense.”

On the way out, the pair passed a mystified Jonca who had apparently been loitering by the door. Cheetara regretted the girl had to see her mother in such a state, ranting incoherently about spells and bringing Lion-O back from the dead, let alone being dragged along against her will. But in the long run, this was what was best for Felina. They’d risked too much and lost too much to let Felina go through with her crazy scheme, as far as Cheetara was concerned.



Jaga's worst fear was coming true. Once again, he had trouble locating the spirit of Lion-O. And once again, he found it wandering Third Earth. But this time, it wasn't wandering the halls of Cats' Lair or any of the other places Lion-O loved on Third Earth when he was alive. This time, he found Lion-O back at the place that was the beginning of the end for him. In the rocky desolate region where his soul first departed from its earth-bound flesh form was where Lion-O wandered.

Jaga feared as much. The last time they'd spoken, Lion-O was distraught, more so than ever before. His breakthrough in communication with his daughter had been dashed after the child closed her mind to seeing his spectral form, and with that last easy window into his prior life slammed shut on him, Lion-O's spirit was in woeful despair; in enough despair to become a shadow of its former self.

Jaga's own hopes sank as he realized he might be too late. He watched helplessly as shadowy imprints of the still-living players from the real tragedy that took place reprised their parts along with the despondent spirit of Lion-O. Lion-O would wander the rocky terrain retracing the final steps he'd taken the day he died. Lion-O would get to a certain point, then turn around to go back the way he'd just come. Then he'd get ambushed by a Grune-like silhouette, put up a fight, and ultimately tossed to his death. The ghost would rise and repeat the same final acts of his lost life, over and over with the shadow players, and nothing Jaga said or did seemed to stop it. If Jaga couldn't think of something to snap Lion-O out of this infinite loop of acting out his own death, then Lion-O would be trapped in that vicious cycle forever, neither alive nor able to enjoy the afterlife. His soul would be damned to the place it had been doomed for all time, unable to move on.

But something had to be done, Jaga thought firmly. There had to be a way. But what was it? Certainly, he could not live Lion-O's soul to such a sad, eternal fate.

To the centre of the city where all roads meet, waiting for you,

To the depths of the ocean where all hopes sank, searching for you,

I was moving through the silence without motion, waiting for you,

In a room with a window in the corner I found truth.

In the shadowplay, acting out your own death, knowing no more,

As the assassins all grouped in four lines, dancing on the floor,

*And with cold steel, odour on their bodies made a move to connect,
But I could only stare in disbelief as the crowds all left.*

*I did everything, everything I wanted to,
I let them use you for their own ends,
To the centre of the city in the night, waiting for you.
To the centre of the city in the night, waiting for you.*

--Shadow Play, The Joy Division

Tell me what you see

Was it a dream?

Was I in it?

Life seems so obscene

Until it's over

Who knows?

All I want is someone who can fill the hole

In the life I know

In between life and death

When there's nothing left

Do you wanna know?

*You come in on your own
And you leave on your own
Forget the lovers you've known
And your friends on your own*

*Tell me if it's true
That I need you
You are changing
I've seen this road before down on this floor
It is hurting me*

*All I want is someone
Who can fill the hole
In the life I know
In between life and death
When there's nothing left
Do you want to know?*

*You come in on your own
And you leave on your own
Forget the lovers you've known
And your friends on your own
You come in on your own*

*And you leave on your own
Forget the lovers you've known
And your friends you have told*

--On Your Own, The Verve