

Chapter 37 of *Signal in the Sky*

Vision Valley

By Purrsia Kat & Spaced Angel

In a place between the living and the dead, a former Lord of the Thundercats observed his successor struggle against an unbreakable net. No ropes held him, just the spider's web of psychic energy, passing from one realm into another. Time and again did he try to escape. Time and again was he repelled by a glowing pulse and sent spinning back into the whispering mass.

It gave Jaga no pleasure to watch Lion-O's defeat. It had given him no pleasure to bring him here in the first place. It had however been necessary. If this was torment, then how much worse it had been to bear witness to the sorry replay of his death and his even sadder attempts to right what now could never be rectified. As much as Lion-O could not accept his own death, so Jaga could not accept the sad fate that his former charge had chosen for himself.

He had intervened against all good advice. Impossible it was to change a soul so driven, he had been told. He is lost, he had been told. Lion-O had lost himself, but in doing so he had lost any chance he had ever had of being reunited with his family and friends when their time came to join him on the Astral Plane. While it was still in his power, Jaga had sworn to spare them that, even if it meant his own sanity. For standing here, on the high plain above the frenetic exchange of psychic energies in a place called Vision Valley, to see Lion-O struggle to so little avail tore his heart to shreds. Cruel to be kind went the old saying, and Jaga had never felt crueler.

Only when all else had failed had he resorted to this, the most desperate of measures. After rescuing him from the cycle of life and death at Grune's hands, he had tried to reason with him and make him see sense. He had used every argument and Lion-O had clung stubbornly to his warped sense of logic. At that moment when Jaga had appealed to him for the sake of Felina and his children to end this torment had something of the old Lion-O resurfaced. He had been angry, frighteningly so to a lesser individual, banging his fists and raging that all he was doing was for them.

With that had come a little hope. Perhaps he was not as lost as it had been claimed. If Jaga could rouse that fire within him once again, maybe he could bring Lion-O back from the blinkered condition of his futile attempt to change his fate. What he had done to do that, he had done out of love. He only hoped Lion-O would one day realize that. For now, Jaga had heard Lion-O make promises, act willing and receptive to reason, only to have him rebound back to that place of dark determination that would only be his ultimate undoing. Jaga was an old soul that was tiring and he knew that simply keeping tabs on Lion-O was not working. Another episode of shadow play, and Jaga may be out of time before Lion-O was spent. So in the end, bringing Lion-O here during his last amiable mood seemed the only way to contain him for now. And if he never came to his senses? Jaga didn't want to entertain that possibility, but it couldn't be pushed aside. Time

could be a great healer, so went another saying of the ancients, and Jaga simply had to hope it applied to distressed souls as well. At least time was what they had an endless supply of, now. It was a strange comfort to Jaga to know that, as long as Lion-O struggled against it, he could not leave the Valley on his own volition. Lion-O held the key to his own soul's freedom if only he would realize it.

Listening to his curses, however, he was still far from that point. Vision Valley was a forsaken place, avoided by the inhabitants of the Astral Plane. Not that it was a place of either evil or good, but to fall into its snares was to risk an eternity of entrapment. Stay there too long, buffeted by the psychic pulses that moved between planes, and the soul's energy could wane, drained by the effort of escape. Here, a soul came as near as was immortally possible to dying. Their essence would remain, but their forms would evaporate. If he listened closely enough, Jaga could hear the mournful cries of those who had died here carried on the ethereal winds that moved about this place. He did not wish that fate on Lion-O. He could only hope that sense would prevail before he had to watch him fade to nothing and to hear his sad cries join those of the others.

It was a risk, but it had its advantages. Separated from the tableau of his death, it would allow Lion-O the time to reflect on his actions. Having discovered that, he would have time to heal. The journey would be difficult, and Jaga had resolved to be there every step of the way. This was the hardest time for Lion-O and his oaths and curses gave a clear indication as to what was plaguing his tormented mind. Frustrated in escape, he had turned his aggression on Jaga, accusing him of trying to keep him here in the realm of the dead. It was hard to listen to, but Jaga was sure this time would pass.

For how long, he could not say for certain. All it needed was that spark to ignite in Lion-O's soul. If, as he said, he wanted to get back to Felina, he would one day see that fighting against what had happened to him would change nothing. In this place, he could not witness what he had lost or the people that were left behind. From this place, the only way forward was to embrace change. Jaga had already told him that. The time needed to accept his death Vision Valley could give him. One day, he would finally be ready to cross over.

And when that time came, Jaga would be waiting.



Five hours ago, they had made love.

Since then, he had yet to close his eyes in sleep. With her head resting on his upper arm, Cheetara slept easily. He watched her sleep, wondering if she dreamt. Probably not, he told himself. Her face was relaxed and he noted there just the faintest trace of a smile. Whatever

dreams she had, they were not like his, savage in their ferocity, unyielding in their torment, sweat-inducing in their warped sense of reality.

For too many nights had they denied him his rest. He had hoped that he would find a quieter mind in the delicious exhaustion that came after their lovemaking. It had been a while since they had last made love and, looking back, he wondered who was more surprised at his boldness. Afterwards, Cheetara had pronounced their togetherness as 'unexpected', a vague word that gave him no indication as to whether she had enjoyed it or not. Whilst she had fallen asleep, he had been left awake to ponder her meaning. That she had snuggled up to him and had remained there during the night he supposed meant she was not entirely displeased. Her mood in bed was easy to read like that. A turned back usually meant he had done something wrong. At least this night he had not.

His own mental state was less happy. If anything, his mind was more enflamed than ever. The body was tired, but the mind refused to listen. Over and over it turned, raking up all the old arguments, turning certainties into doubts and making mountains out of molehills. In the dead of night, a chance remark took on the semblance of criticism of epic proportions and a glance shared between friends became a conspiracy against him. He kept telling himself that living like this was crazy, but it did not seem to make much of a difference. The doubt remained, if anything intensified and concertained into a great well of uncertainty that grew with every passing day.

Then, sometime during the long night, the answer came to him in a blinding flash of revelation. It was so obvious really, he had to wonder why he had not thought of it before. Where they were doubts, it was time for confidence. If proof they demanded, then proof they would get.

With the first rays of daylight creeping through the curtains of their room, he felt the urge to rise with the sun and make ready for the day ahead. His chest rose and fell in impatience a little too vigorously for Cheetara moaned softly. Her fingers contracted, leaving little trails of sensitivity as they drew across his breast, and her muscles began to twitch. Wakefulness was fast coming, and it was not long before her sleepy eyes met his. She smiled and raised herself on one elbow.

"Good morning," she said in a voice still heavy with sleep.

"And to you too."

"Sleep well?"

He shook his head.

"Oh?" She raised one elegant eyebrow. "You usually sleep like a baby after we make love."

"Not tonight."

She grinned. "Well, don't let that put you off."

“Meaning?”

She gave a slight shrug. “It was unexpected.”

There was that word again, he thought. Her opinion, whatever it was, had not changed during the night. “Unexpectedly good or bad?”

She gave him a long, hard stare. “Why do you do that, Tygra?”

“What?”

“Keep looking for criticism where none is intended.” She sighed and rolled away from him. “It’s annoying and unnecessary. When I’m not happy, I’ll tell you.” She grabbed her robe from the side table and thrust her arms into the sleeves. “Since I’m awake, I might as well go for a run. Want to come with me and run off some of that frustration you’re carrying about with you?”

“No, I’ll pass.”

She accepted his refusal without comment and continued on her way to the bathroom. He listened to the splash of running water, the clatter of objects being moved around and finally the footsteps that came his way. The towel was discarded on the bed, treating him to the tantalising sight of her rear view before it disappeared beneath her clothes. A quick flick of the brush through her hair and she was ready to go, except she did not head for the door, but came over to him and clambered back on the bed.

“You’re a fool, do you know that?” she said. “That’s why I love you. And last night...” She grinned wolfishly. “That was great.”

“Thank you.”

She kissed him on the lips and pulled quickly away before he could take a firmer hold and keep her with him. “Don’t leave it so long next time,” she said. “Try and get some sleep. There’s still time before the others get up.”

A final kiss on his forehead and she was gone. There was little point in remaining where he was, given his lack of success the rest of the night, so he dressed and made his way downstairs. Cheetara had already headed out and the Lair was unusually silent. He wandered into the kitchen to make himself something to drink and found Snarf, who was slaving over a hot oven and sweating profusely. In between muttering something about not wasting good food, he did let slip that Panthro was up and hard at work in the Paw hangar. Leaving Snarf to his pots and pans and precious time to himself before the rest of the Lair started to get under his feet, Tygra headed down the hangar to seek out Panthro.

There came the regular clang of metal beating metal from behind the closed door and Tygra reflected that he had not brought enough hot liquid refreshment to go round. Sure enough, the door opened to reveal Bengali hard at work, hammering out a sheet of metal, and Panthro’s

backside and legs protruding from the windowless cabin of the ship they had named the Thunderstrike.

“How goes?” Tygra called.

Bengali paused, but Panthro remained where he was. “Not bad,” came the panther’s voice. “We could sure use a hand though.”

“Thought you could.”

He passed the tray with its two mugs to Bengali, who took the offering with thanks, and entered the empty husk of the ship. Making his way past the collection of loose wires and anonymous boxes, he finally found the top half of Panthro in the cabin, screwdriver in one hand and a lump of something vaguely electrical-looking in the other.

“Laser linkage,” Panthro said by way of explanation. “I need an extra pair of hands to get this stuff in.”

Tygra smiled and eased himself into the pilot’s seat to get to the source of the problem. While they worked, he considered whether now would be a good time to put his idea forward. Panthro seemed relaxed and in a good mood, despite the early hour. Telling him now would give him a chance to sound out his opinion and perhaps gain his support before putting it to the others. The fate of his idea depended on Panthro’s response.

With Panthro’s arms buried deep in the belly of the control panel, Tygra decided it was time to speak up while he was out of harm’s way. He was sure Panthro was not going to like what he had to say, and so tried a roundabout tack to the problem.

“Couldn’t sleep?” he asked casually.

Panthro grunted. “I had this idea for the Thunderstrike’s defences keep going round and round in my head. It wouldn’t let me rest. So I got up and I’ve been working on the darned thing ever since.” He nodded in Tygra’s direction. “How about you? I heard Cheetara go out early.”

“We were both awake.”

Panthro grinned. “And you couldn’t think of anything better to do than to get up?”

Tygra studiously ignored the remark. “When do you think she’ll be flight worthy?”

“The Thunderstrike? Oh, another month or so if we work flat out.” He hesitated for a fraction of a second. “What then?”

“We make our plans.”

“To leave, you mean.”

“I don’t see why not. We have the signal. If there’s a colony of Thunderian survivors out there, it’s our duty to reach them.”

“Duty be damned!” Panthro’s arms came abruptly out of the control panel and he flexed his fingers. “Cramp,” he explained, in answer to Tygra’s quizzical look. “What about the people of Third Earth?”

“What about them?”

Panthro scowled. “Don’t give me that. You know as well as I do--“

“The Mutants will follow us,” Tygra said cutting him short. “We’ll deal with them later. And I imagine, the same with Grune.”

“Lion-O didn’t think Grune would go quietly. And Mumm-Ra?”

Tygra held his gaze for a moment, and then looked back at the tangle of wires which were knotted around his fingers. “He’s not our problem.”

“Oh, really?”

The tone carried just enough sardonic flavour to warn Tygra that his friend’s mood was rapidly changing. “With all due respects, Panthro, we didn’t bring him to Third Earth like we did the Mutants. He was here already. The people used to manage without us.”

“That was then,” Panthro said. “And if you talk with a Wollo more than five minutes, you’re reminded that our arrival seemed to have awakened the old mummy. In a way, Mumm-Ra’s current activity is our fault. What’s going to happen when we leave?”

Tygra pushed the last connection home and rested his hands on the smooth edge of the control panel. “I’ve thought about that. Why can’t we teach them to defend themselves? Perhaps persuade them to group together for mutual defence, like...” He struggled for the right words. “Like some sort of league. Yes, a League of Third Earth. If they present a united front against him, they’ll stand a better chance. They can use this place as a base; we won’t be needing it anymore. Maybe...maybe even build them a second outpost with our technology, closer to the desert, so they can monitor things better.”

Panthro snorted and shook his head. “A bunch of furry robots and women up against Mumm-Ra. You might as well ask them to commit suicide. And an outpost? Are you serious? That’ll delay our return even longer.”

“You forget, the Berbils are industrious. The outpost I have in mind – tentatively called The Tower of Omens – is something on a much smaller scale than the Lair and could be completed with their help in virtually no time,” Tygra reasoned. “This tower would also have a powerful beacon installed on top, so we can stay in contact with Third Earth when we reach home. If

there's big trouble, we should be able to perhaps, travel back and set things right. The destination planet isn't that far off – we won't need suspension, like we did in coming here.”

Panthro's expression told Tygra he grudgingly conceded that point. “But, what about Mumm-Ra? I still don't see how, united or not, they stand a chance. There're days we barely get the better of him and it'll still take time to get back here to help. We might be too late.”

“They managed before,” Tygra said reasonably. “They will again. Except this time, they will have an edge. We can give them that much.” Reflecting on Panthro's hot words, he had to smile. “And I wouldn't let Willa hear you calling her Warrior Maidens a bunch of women as though they're helpless.”

It was a curious thing, but over the years Panthro had gone from being their greatest supporter to their sternest critic. When he did attend their gatherings, he took pains to maintain a noticeable distance between himself and a certain Warrior Maiden called Nayda. Tygra had often had cause to wonder if Cheetara's supposition that the pair had fallen out over something did bear a grain of truth. No one held a grudge quite like Panthro.

“They're insular,” came Panthro's reply as he stubbornly stuck his head down and plunged his hands back into the web of wires. “What can they do with bows and arrows? We've got technology and we still struggle.”

Whether meant for him or not, the barb struck deeply into his soul and burrowed its way unrelentingly to the well of doubt. There it was received and fermented the mix into a pulsating mass of anxiety.

“Because of me?” Tygra said, forcing down the bitter aftertaste that the experience had left in his mouth.

Panthro glanced up at him briefly. “No,” he said shortly. “Because of what we're up against. Even Lion-O struggled against those odds.”

True, Tygra thought, but at least he had been the anointed Lord of the Thundercats. He had proven himself in the Trials and had become bound to the Sword of Omens for the greater good of all the Thundercats. By comparison, his successor was a mere impostor, taking the name, but wielding little of the power attached to it. Only one thing could ever change that.

His troubles must have been visible on his face, for Panthro's voice quickly snapped him out of reverie.

“You still worrying about your performance the other day?” he asked.

Tygra sighed. There was little point in denying what Panthro had already guessed. “It was hardly glowing, was it?”

“We won, didn’t we? And gave that bastard Grune a good thrashing while we were about it.” A grunt of grim satisfaction slipped his lips. “About time too. A shame we couldn’t have carried our plan to fruition. Next time we will. We’ll make him pay for what he did to Lion-O.”

Next time, Tygra reflected, things would be different. What he was about to suggest would ensure that.

“Lion-O was the anointed Lord of the Thundercats,” he said.

“Yeah, so?”

“I’m not.”

Panthro stifled a laugh. “So, what d’you wanna do about it? Try your hand at the Anointment Trials?”

The laugh died on his lips when Tygra fixed him with his most serious expression.

“Great Jaga, you’re not joking, are you?”

“No, I’m not.”

Grabbing the skeleton ribs of the cabin roof, Panthro hauled himself through the window and landed in the co-pilot’s seat beside Tygra. He folded his arms and regarded the tiger gravely.

“Why?” he asked simply.

“Because it’s necessary.”

“For whom? Us... or you?” He let the remark hang in the air while he shook his head. “This is madness, Tygra. Lion-O was a young man when he did those Trials. You’re--“

“More than ready to try.”

“You’re middle-aged with a daughter who’s almost in her teens. You’ll never do it. Besides, Jaga never had to do any trials to take over for Claudus. It’s only for the hereditary Lord, to insure that he’s still the right one for the job despite inheriting the privilege. You were elected for the short term. It’s different. Isn’t it?”

“I can still try.”

“Against me and Cheetara? We’ll wipe the floor with you.”

Tygra gritted his teeth and tried not to let himself be roused. “You’re not so young yourself, Panthro.”

The panther's expression did not waver, a miracle considering his prowess had just been called into question. "I could beat you with one hand tied behind my back," he said nonchalantly. "Besides, you doing these Trials is pointless. Again, Jaga was in exactly the same position as you and he never bothered with them."

"Claudus appointed Jaga as his successor when he stepped down as Lord of the Thundercats. Jaga had his blessing. I have this honour only because no one else wanted it."

"Because you were second-in-command," Panthro reminded him. "That's blessing enough for me."

"Jaga made me head of Council – that's a stretch to assume I'm second-in-command."

Panthro rubbed his head in obvious agitation that the conversation was going nowhere fast. "I'm pretty sure Lion-O also had said at one point, that if anything happened to him you were to be the next Lord of the Thundercats. Am I remembering that right, old friend?"

Tygra sighed. His mind went back to that time Mumm-Ra had tricked Lion-O into attacking him in the forest, and the Sword of Omens was broken and rendered powerless as a result. Lion-O was willing to die trying to rectify the situation and had hastily anointed him the successor if the worst had happened.

"Technically yes." Tygra held up a hand to silence the coming 'a-ha!' that he felt was about to spring off Panthro's lips. "But, Lion-O was under duress at the time, never mind that I happened to be the only one around he could declare his successor at the time. The thing is, he never brought the motion to Council after the fact to make that official to secure the Lordship in the future. Probably when he was thinking straight, he even knew back then it was a bad idea."

Panthro stared at Tygra for a long moment, and Tygra couldn't decide if his expression bore more disbelief or disgust. "What the hell is the matter with you?"

Tygra knew from his tone, Panthro was angry and decided therefore that it would be best to let the question hang rhetorically between them.

Panthro continued unfettered. "How dare you question the judgment of all the Thundercats. How dare you assume that none of the rest of us would have proudly taken the position you gained out of our mutual confidence and respect?"

Panthro's voice was rising as he continued his tirade, and Tygra was sure if it wasn't for the clamor Bengali was creating as he worked below, the whole Lair would have been able to feel the sting of his chastising words.

"You would think after all these years of accomplishment, you'd have more faith in yourself than this. I don't understand it!"

Tygra looked away, before muttering, “I don’t expect you to.” Tygra had always been on the shy side and this situation all but proved he was less than comfortable in the spotlight, leading the way. He just couldn’t believe the others couldn’t see that as well.

“Your problem,” Panthro continued, “is you pick everything apart, and read into things and come out with things that aren’t there.”

Funny, Tygra thought to himself, Cheetara had made the same claim earlier.

“So, Lion-O didn’t bring the issue to Council. Big deal. It’s a technicality. Maybe he knew the choice would be so obvious, we wouldn’t have to be formal about it. Or maybe, in our first days here, he was so overwhelmed with what we faced just trying to survive, the formalities slipped his mind. Truth is, Tygra, I can make as many excuses to show you’re being ridiculous about this as you can come up with to try to weasel out of the position.”

That stuck in Tygra’s craw, and he wasn’t going to let the comment slide. “Weasel? I resent that implication. I’m sorry if I’m not as cock-sure and arrogant in this new role as maybe you’d like me to be but I would not have accepted the Council’s decision if I felt I absolutely wasn’t capable of what the role demands. I just want a way to prove to everyone – and yes, to myself – that I’ve earned this just as much as anyone else had before me.”

“Fine. So, you want to do the Trials?”

“Yes.”

“Then you’ll be happy?”

“Happier,” Tygra corrected him.

“I still say it’s pointless.”

“Then consider how the Thunderian survivors will view the situation.” Panthro turned a puzzled face to him, not following his line of argument. “If we go there and I am not the anointed Lord of the Thundercats, there are sure to be those who will question that fact. They will want to try their hand for the position. Only if I am truly Lord can I ensure that when the time comes, the lordship will pass to Leon. That must never be doubted. He is the heir. I’m just filling in for him until he comes of age.”

Panthro took a few moments to digest this information. He did recall some discord, after all, on Thundera when Jaga was chosen in Claudus’ stead to carry on until Lion-O was grown. Some factions never accepted Jaga as interim Lord and for some of those very reasons. “Maybe you’re right. Better that we handle it and take it easy on you--”

“No,” Tygra said firmly.

“All right, then not too easy.”

Tygra shook his head. "I'm sorry, Panthro, no. With the best intentions in the world, I know what will happen. There's too much at stake for me to lose and inevitably you'll feel the need to let me win. For that reason, I cannot face any of the Thundercats who took part in Lion-O's Trials." He drew a deep breath, giving himself a moment of calmness before the storm. "I need to be against someone who will give no quarter, who will make life as difficult for me as possible."

He let his gaze drift beyond the confines of the cabin to where sparks flew in time to the regular drumbeat of metal on metal.

"Bengali?" Panthro said incredulously. "You want to go up against him?"

"Why not? He wants to prove himself. So do I. We can kill two birds with one stone. He'll be the first. I'll take on all the newer ThunderCats. But if I can't best Bengali there'll be no point in going on with it."

Panthro stared at him as though he had just declared himself king of Plun-darr. "Tygra, he's young and he's hungry. What happens if you lose?"

Tygra shrugged. "Then you have a ready-made Lord of the Thundercats." He gave Panthro a pat on the shoulder to ease some of the concern he saw etched on his face. "He might be young, but I've got experience. We'll be evenly matched. That way, no one can ever say I won too easily."

"No, they won't say that," Panthro said. "But what kind of Trial? He's good at many things, but master of none, except his metalwork, and you're not so hot at that."

"I've already thought about that. I was thinking about creating a new Trial, a Trial of Endurance. A race, if you like, lasting a whole Third Earth day, across different types of terrain, facing a variety of dangers. It'll test one not only physically, but mentally, too. First person home is declared the winner. Simple."

"Simple?" Panthro grunted. "Too many variables in that for my liking." He paused. "I take it you've told Cheetara your plans?" At Tygra's shake of the head, he grinned. "I see. So you've been using me to test out your theory. Well, my friend, you're in for bad news. See, I actually think it's a good idea. I wouldn't bet on you to win, but if it puts you out of your misery, then so much the better."

"Thanks," said Tygra, giving him a sideways look. "You really build up my confidence."

"Just telling it like it is. You said yourself there's too much at stake if you lose."

"Yes, I know."

Panthro gave him a grin. "So, you'll have to win, won't you?"

Something about the way he said it sent warning bells ringing in Tygra's mind. "You're planning something. What?"

“On Jaga’s life, I swear not.”

Hardly reassuring, Tygra thought, considering that Jaga had long departed this mortal realm for more spiritual planes of existence.

“Don’t you think you should ask Bengali before you put this to the others?” Panthro inquired. “He’s down there now. Go ahead and ask him.”

There was some wisdom in Panthro’s words. To spring it on Bengali risked him refusing out of embarrassment at being put on the spot. On reflection that could work in his favour, but he quickly squashed the idea. He wanted this Trial to be a success, so that a line could be drawn under the question of his suitability for leadership. If he were to persuade Bengali, he had to follow Panthro’s advice and put the suggestion to him now.

Leaving the confines of the cabin, he headed out of the ship and over to where Bengali was still toiling over a large sheet of metal that he was holding with pincers in the heat of the temporary furnace they had set up in the hangar. Tygra waited while he hammered it out into a satisfactory state and then for the sizzle of cold water on hot metal to die down. Seeing both him and Panthro standing nearby, Bengali put down his tools and wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his glove.

“Almost done,” he said, gesturing to the sheet. “Just hammering it into shape for the hull.”

“That’s fine, kid,” Panthro said. “Leave it a minute. Tygra has something he wants to ask you.”

Tygra could have cursed him for taking the words out of his mouth. There were better ways to approach this situation, but he supposed that being direct had its advantages.

“I’m planning on taking the Anointment Trials,” he began. “I wondered if you would take part, Bengali.”

The younger tiger’s mouth dropped open a fraction. “Who? Me?”

Tygra nodded.

“Doing what?”

“What you’re good at. A Trial of Endurance. You against me in a day long race. First one home claims the crown.”

“I see.” He fell silent for a moment and licked his lips thoughtfully. “What if I win?”

“Then you could well be Lord of the Thundercats.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Then I will be confirmed in the leadership.”

Bengali considered for a moment and then shook his head. “I’m not playing along with this. I smell a rat. This is some sort of test for me, right? You want to see if I take the bait because of what I said the other day about you not valuing us as members of the team.”

“No, no test, Bengali. I’m not trying to trick you. I want your help, that’s all.”

“You’re asking me for my help? Why not ask the others? From what I hear, they took part in Lion-O’s Trials.”

Tygra nodded. “Indeed, they did. We all did. But times have changed. We have new Thundercats now. It is only right that you take part in these Trials.”

Bengali still looked suspicious. “But you’re already Lord of the Thundercats, Tygra. We all voted you in. Why go through the Trials?”

“He wants to prove that he’s good enough,” said Panthro. “You ask me it’s nothing more than ego stroking.”

“Is it?” Bengali asked. “You want me to help you do that?”

“No,” Tygra said firmly. “I need the Sword of Omens to accept me. I believe I can only do that if I take the Trials. As Lion-O won his trials, the Sword reacted – no doubt making the bond between Sword and wielder deeper.”

Bengali stared at him, trying to test the veracity of that statement against his expression. “Let’s say I believe you,” he said, his voice still full of mistrust. “Why me?”

“Because I know I can trust you more than anyone else to make the contest fair,” he said, his gaze never wandering from Bengali’s face. “And of the three newer Thundercats, you’re probably going to be my toughest competition. You might as well go first. Well, what do you say?”

The reply was a long time coming, causing Panthro to sigh loudly. “How can you refuse after a compliment like that? Shake on it and let’s get back to work!”

The cajoling worked. Bengali pulled his work glove from his hand and extended his arm towards Tygra. “You won’t beat me,” he said with a confident grin.

“I can try,” said Tygra, returning his smile. “Let’s wait and see.”

“You said it,” said Panthro. “We’ve still got to sell this deal to the others.”

“We don’t have to sell it. What’s done is done. The Trial of Endurance will take place tomorrow. We will tell the other Thundercats and they must agree.”

Or at least agree but not like it, he thought, as he trailed Panthro back to the Thunderstrike. If past experience was anything to go by, he knew that he would be staring at Cheetara's back in bed for many nights to come.



A table full of food in a crowded room and no one was eating. It was more than his flesh could bear. Luscious pies, baked with the plumpest candy fruits, taunted him with their mouth-watering smells, made all the sweeter by the knowledge that these had been stolen fresh this morning. Wine, like liquid rubies, teetered on the edge of the goblet, crying out for his attention. All he had to do was to reach out and take it. Except no one else was eating.

Curse that Mumm-Ra, Slithe thought, biting his own knuckles out of frustration. As usual he demanded their presence at this gathering and then was late in turning up himself. Bad enough he had to spend time with those cretins who called themselves Mutants, but sharing a room with Grune, that loathsome Thunderian, was pure torture. His attitude had always stunk, but now he was unbearable. He never wasted an opportunity to remind them how he and he alone had been responsible for killing their greatest enemy. Now Lion-O was gone, Slithe had to wonder if that 'greatest enemy' label had really suited him. He could think of other candidates for that title, particularly the decaying stench of undead person that was Mumm-Ra. Furthermore, it wasn't like they were any further ahead – the other surviving ThunderCats still held the Sword of Omens.

As the minutes pressed on and Grune's crowing grew all the louder, Slithe could feel his patience fast unraveling. Better to have Lion-O back than have to endure this boasting. Like a never-ending record, Grune kept going over the same old ground, each time embellishing it to his greater glory. It was worth listening just to hear what story he could invent next. He was fast coming to the point where he would do away with the extraneous detail altogether and claim he tipped Lion-O over that mountain without even breaking a sweat.

But for now, he was ploughing through the turgid events with the keenness of a seeker for gold in the river. How he looked, what he did then, the stone he trod on, the direction from which the wind was blowing. Slithe was sure someone would be interested in these minutiae, but he was past caring. Now he wanted to eat this breakfast that had been laying here for the best part of half an hour while they waited for Mumm-Ra to put in an appearance.

"He was probably late for his own funeral," he said out loud, unwittingly giving voice to his own thoughts.

"Who was?" said Vultureman, his brow creased in puzzlement.

"Mumm-Ra," Slithe grunted. "He's not coming. Let's eat."

“You lack faith, Mutant,” came a throaty voice from the direction of the window.

Slithe cast a dull look in his direction. Mumm-Ra had a flair for the dramatic that no longer impressed him.

“Do you care for your belly more than your triumph over the Thundercats?”

Before Slithe could summon up the energy to answer, Grune cut in. “They are defeated already. That was my doing.”

“You defeated Lion-O,” Mumm-Ra corrected him. “But, as our little show revealed, they are still a force to be reckoned with.”

“Don’t make me laugh,” Grune muttered. “Without Lion-O, they are nothing.”

Mumm-Ra advanced towards the table and dipped his finger in a dollop of cream that was starting a downward slide off a particularly gooey cake. Slithe watched with growing disgust as Mumm-Ra inserted his finger into his mouth and licked it clean.

“Cheap, but sweet,” he said. “But how much sweeter life could be without the Thundercats? Don’t you agree, Slithe? Because of them, you have to feed yourself with second-rate morsels. Why deprive yourself the luxuries of life?”

“You have a plan, yes?” Slithe said, the mention of food piquing his interest.

“These ‘nothings’, as you call them Grune, are intelligent and resourceful. They were able to survive the death of Lion-O. They have regrouped and they have a new leader.” Mumm-Ra found himself an empty chair and slumped down into it. “As weary as I am of this game, it pains me to say that I have developed a certain admiration for the Thundercats.”

“Why do I find that hard to believe?” Vultureman said disparagingly. “You, admire them? Caw, I am willing to bet the feeling isn’t mutual.”

“There must always be respect for your enemy,” said Mumm-Ra, casting a dangerous look in the Mutant’s direction. “Lion-O lost respect for his enemy and suffered accordingly. It was once said that you get the enemy you deserve. I have the Thundercats.” A sound halfway between a laugh and a snort escaped him. “My enemy does me credit. Anyone would be proud of them. Under Lion-O’s leadership, they were formidable. But now...” He paused. “Now I sense their weakness. Now they shame me.”

“‘Shame you’?” Slithe said incredulously. “You just got done saying they’ve regrouped. Weren’t we shamed the other day when you had us let them win?”

Mumm-Ra waved an airy hand. “That was necessary. I had to test my foe and I was disappointed. I found him wanting, a shadow of my adversary of old. It is time to end this game we play. It is time for Mumm-Ra the Ever Living to end it!”

He had risen and all four withered feet of him rippled with rage. Slithe was unimpressed, but that little outburst had alerted him to something else that had been worrying him. Mumm-Ra never talked of unity, except when he needed their help. If it was a game, like Mumm-Ra said, Slithe had to wonder when their role in it had been reduced to the mere sidekicks of an ancient madman. When the Thundercats were finished, if that were possible, what then would become of him and the other Mutants? Had their game ended too?

“Their new leader, in his infinite wisdom, has decided to follow their age-old tradition of partaking in Anointment Trials. That will be the ideal time to launch our attack.”

“The Trials?” Grune said suddenly. “Why?”

Mumm-Ra gave him a sideways glance. “Because he lives his life to a Code, as do they all. Let that rule your life and you end up blinkered. Tradition states, as I’m sure you know from the days of Lion-O’s Trials, that he must perform them alone, unaided, and unarmed. All the better for us to pick him off, and enslave the others.”

Grune snorted. “More like he believes it will give him standing within the group. Tygra was always a minor player. That they chose him as leader shows just how weak and desperate they are!”

“How do you know this anyway?” Slithe asked impatiently.

“I have my methods,” Mumm-Ra replied. “Does it matter?”

Slithe shrugged. No doubt the old corpse had been listening in again through the magic of that cauldron of his. It had its uses, but Slithe found it unsettling. If Mumm-Ra could listen in to anyone at any time, he had to wonder what he had heard at Castle Plun-darr. Pushing that thought aside, he turned his attention to the other question Mumm-Ra’s plan had raised.

“Why now?” he asked suspiciously. “If they are as weak as you say, why not wait? There will be other times, yes.”

Mumm-Ra’s soulless eyes took on a dull glow as though his gaze had become introverted. “Because they are planning to leave Third Earth.”

Grune let out a raucous burst of laughter. “Ha, I knew it. Turning tail and running away like the cowards they are!”

“Not exactly,” said Mumm-Ra. “They have detected a signal that they believe will lead them to other Thunderian survivors.”

“Impossible,” murmured Vultureman. “The other ships in the convoy were destroyed.”

“Apparently not. The Thundercats will leave within the month to join them.” The glow intensified in his eyes. “I will not permit them to do so.”

A shiver ran down Slithe's spine. Live or die, he did not care about the Thundercats. In fact, by letting them leave, Mumm-Ra could have rid himself of his problem. Except he had chosen not to do so. Like a selfish child with his cache of toys, he would not tolerate the idea of sharing. That they should try to leave him was out of the question. And if he would not allow his sworn enemies to leave, then it boded ill for his so-called allies. Slithe could envisage a time when he would hear those words spoken about himself and the other Mutants.

"Why do you care?" Slithe challenged, emboldened by his aggravation at the delay of the meal. "If they leave, Third Earth is yours for the taking. You've won! Let them go and save your energy."

"Foolish cretin," Mumm-Ra growled. "At least Grune and I understand one thing the same. Hell, even the late Lion-O could understand this. My pride is at stake. If I let them go unchallenged, it's like saying it's alright to disturb my everliving rest, spend years humiliating me in defeats, and then just walk away unscarred and unscathed. No! Lion-O being gone is not enough. They **all** had a hand in the forced rest I took this past decade, and they will **all** pay. I most certainly will not let them skip off happily to their countrymen for a sickeningly sweet homecoming with that insult going unchallenged."

Slithe snorted. "And this is our problem, because...?"

"You will help me, even if you have no pride yourself, mutant," said Mumm-Ra. As usual, it was not a request, rather a demand. "During this Trial, the Thundercats will be separated and distracted. Taking them will be easy... even for you," he added, staring pointedly at Slithe.

"We can take them any time," Slithe returned, scowling back at him.

"Well, any time is now. Once they leave Third Earth, even if we follow them to pursue our revenge, it'll be more difficult. They will reunite with others and be a bigger headache than ever. Now is the time, like it or not." With a flourish, Mumm-Ra scooped up the nearest goblet and raised it into the air. "A toast," he declared. "To a life without the Thundercats!"

Grune quickly joined him. "Death to them all!"

Mumm-Ra let go of a sinister chuckle. "By the time we're done with them, they'll be begging us to put them out of their misery. We will make them feel every ounce of shame, insignificance and frustration we have ever felt and then some! Then, and only then, will we grant their wish and snuff them out of their miserable existences!"

Grudgingly, Slithe raised his own goblet and joined the cheer. The others dived onto the food like starving wolves, but he found his own appetite had deserted him. Looking at Mumm-Ra, who sat staring upon them like an indulgent parent, Slithe wondered if Grune had wasted his time in dispatching Lion-O. Their greatest enemy was still with them, sharing their table, at least until it no longer suited him. When the Thundercats were gone, when Third Earth was his once more and his pride restored by an over-stuffed ego, what then? When would Mumm-Ra tire of them?

“You’re not eating, Slithe,” Mumm-Ra remarked.

“I’ve lost my appetite,” he muttered. “Must be the company.”

Mumm-Ra chuckled, choosing to ignore the slight. “Yes, Grune can be tiresome.”

Grune looked up. “What?”

“Oh, nothing. Slithe was just saying how he would like to hear how you defeated Lion-O again.”

Grune needed no further invitation. “Well, why didn’t you say?” he said to Slithe, who chose to seethe in silence.

Mumm-Ra rose to his feet. “I must go. Ready yourselves, Mutants. Change is coming. A new world beckons!”

He left as enigmatically as he had arrived, drifting away as so many grains of sand carried on the wind from his desert home. Grune threw himself into his tale with gusto, leaving Slithe to retreat into the quietness of his own mind to mull over what Mumm-Ra had said. A new world, he claimed. But if he knew Mumm-Ra, it would be his world and his alone. He would determine their role in this new world of his. He might need their help, but they had no real say over a situation into which they were being driven headlong.

When that new world came, the Thundercats would be destroyed. He could only hope he and the others, as revolting as they were, would not share the same fate.



The bathroom light clicked off and Cheetara exited from the dark into the brighter glow of the bedroom. Tygra watched as she tidied her things and gave her hair one final brush, before shedding her robe and slipping into the bed beside him. She gave her pillow a good thump and then lay down with her back to him.

After a suitable length of time had passed in silence, Tygra cleared his throat. “You’re angry with me, aren’t you?”

“No,” she said. “You must do what you see fit.”

“But you don’t agree with it?”

“Does it matter what I think?” came her cold reply.

“Yes,” he said. He stared at her back and the mass of yellow hair spread across the pillow. He hated having to talk to her like this and willed her to turn and face him. “Cheetara, I know you’re angry, but please try to understand.”

He was met with silence. He had been expecting as much. Her expression when he had broken the news at the council meeting earlier that he was to take the Anointment Trials had been a picture. Worse still, she had not spoken to him since. He had her consent along with that of the other Thundercats, but that was all. None of them had given it willingly. He had faced a battle of words that he had calmly answered. He had persuaded them, but not convinced them.

With Cheetara, however, he suspected her annoyance was less with what he was proposing than how he had gone about it. An apology was clearly needed.

“Cheetara, I’m sorry. I would have told you.”

Still came silence.

“But I couldn’t share my plans with you, because I knew you would try to talk me out of it.”

That finally provoked a response. She rolled onto her back and stared up at him. “You’re right, Tygra. That’s exactly what I would have done. This is madness.”

“Perhaps.”

“And I am hurt that you didn’t talk this over with me. I would like to have known before you sprang this revelation on us. What happened to us sharing our lives?”

“Cheetara,” he began.

“No, don’t,” she said, rolling over to present him with her back view once more.

The sheet had slipped down to reveal the curve of her spine, like a path between the spots of her skin. On impulse, he reached out, letting his finger trace the tempting line that led down beneath the sheets. She shivered and pulled up the sheet, halting his progress.

“I’m not in the mood,” she said. “Go to sleep. You’ll need your strength for the Trial.”

He smiled, despite the fact that she could not see it with her back turned. “Well, I do need the exercise.”

“Go for a run then,” came her muffled reply.

“Ah, but that’s not as much fun.” He heard her sigh and guessed he was making little headway. “Cheetara, I am sorry. I never meant to hurt you like this. Once this is done, I promise I will never keep anything from you ever again.”

“That’s not the point,” she said, rolling back to face him. “Don’t you think I worry? The Trials are not to be taken lightly, Tygra. What if you get hurt? What happens then to me and Velouria? What do we do without you?” She shivered again, this time not out of anticipation. “I look at Felina sometimes and I see a vision of myself without you.”

“No, that won’t happen.”

She turned worried eyes on him. “It might. Making yourself the anointed Lord doesn’t change the dangers we face.”

“We are Thundercats,” he said soothingly, brushing a stray lock away from her cheek. “These dangers have always been present.”

“No, this is different. Before we were part of a team, but now you’re the head of that team. You will have to take the brunt.”

He put a finger to her lips to calm her worries. “And for that reason, I must take the Trials. The Sword of Omens must accept me fully. Only then will it allow me to use its all powers. It obeys me, Cheetara, but I feel it is holding back, as though it has yet to trust me. We cannot wait for it to make up its mind.”

She stared up at him, the beginnings of tears showing in the corners of her eyes. “Yes,” she conceded with a wavering voice, “the Sword must bond with you, I know.”

He got the feeling she was holding something back, the emotion in her eyes something between dread and sorrow. “Cheetara. What is it? Do you sense something?”

She held his gaze a long moment before responding. “If you leave me, I’ll never forgive you.”

“Then I won’t leave.”

When he kissed her, she did not resist. Her arm snaked around his neck and her fingers entwined in his mane, holding him to her. When he did break away, he found that she was smiling.

“I thought you weren’t in the mood,” he said.

“I’ve changed my mind. I haven’t completely forgiven you, but the thought of you being unexpected again tonight is suddenly very appealing.”

He smiled back and then began gently to kiss her throat, driven on by her small sighs of contentment. If he had to make amends, he could not think of a better way to do so, even if it took all night.



Deep in the recess of sleep, Cheetara found herself in a dream. At first, it was pleasant enough. She was taking a stroll on a sunny, warm day, following the winding bank of the River of Despair. As she walked on, however, the brightness and warmth gradually faded. She continued on until endless cold and grey mist surrounded her long after the River came to its end. This realm held nothing for her earthly senses; no warmth of sunlight, no smell of the earth or foliage, and no breezes to caress her skin. The only thing tangible was a solid surface beneath her feet though it was nondescript and featureless – no hills or valleys or texture to it whatsoever. It was, aside from herself and the mist, a void of emptiness.

But then she felt the presence of an energy she found familiar, and before he emerged to stand before her out of the mist, his name she spoke.

“Lion-O!”

His eyes grew wide with surprise and then pure joy sparkled there. “Oh, Cheetara! I’ve been so lonely here. It’s wonderful to see you.”

His voice cracked with emotion as she welcomed his tight embrace. She found their contact disconcerting, for the warmth that one would expect to be there, radiating from his form, was gone. He seemed to embody some of the nothingness from which this place was made.

If she felt the same to him, he didn’t show it. He leaned back and for a moment, silently took in her familiar form as if he hadn’t laid eyes on a soul – much less a familiar one – in an age.

Cheetara was at a loss as to what to say next. There had been so much emotion with his passing, so many things she’d thought of in the hours and days since his departure, that she told herself she should have said to him when he was alive. And now that he – or at least an embodiment of his soul – was before her, her tongue was stilled.

It was Lion-O that broke the silence.

“I knew it was you that would find me here.”

Cheetara glanced around at the misty air, wondering where exactly ‘here’ was. As if reading her mind, he continued.

“This is the Vision Valley. Jaga put me here – he said, for my own good.”

Cheetara didn’t need her extra sensitivity to pick up on the bitterness Lion-O felt at this turn of events.

“But how can I be here with you?” She wondered. “You’re...you’re gone, Lion-O. In a realm beyond where we have been left behind.”

The pain that flashed in his eyes quickly made Cheetara regret her word choice.

“I-I know that now. I’m trapped here – like being in a cocoon within the Astral World. This is the place from where your psychic feelings and visions come from Cheetara – where anyone with your gift can tap into.”

His reference to her sixth sense as a ‘gift’ made Cheetara wince. She still felt more controlled by it than in control of it, and would never understand the uncertainty with which some urgent messages were delivered, such as, not by coincidence, the demise of Lion-O himself.

“Then, I’m having a vision.”

Lion-O nodded. “Yes, a dream vision, and so I can finally connect with you.”

She glanced around again. “Shouldn’t I be overwhelmed by energies here?”

“Perhaps ordinarily,” Lion-O explained. “I worked at it, and I’ve managed to channel my energies enough to draw you here and keep the other energies at bay – for a time. Jaga may have not been able to teach me how to appear willfully to any of you on Third Earth, but I guess I figured out one thing on my own. Well, and many thanks to what Tygra had taught me about the mind.”

A small smile sprang to Cheetara’s lips. “I’m glad you went to the trouble to bring me here. There’s so much I wanted to say to you—“

He stopped her by placing a ghostly hand gently on her shoulder. “There will be other times. There’s something important I have to tell you, about Grune.”

He had her attention now.

“Jonca mentioned something about that, but some were slow to believe her.”

“Yes. I don’t know why, but she was the only one that can see me in my Astral form. Well, the only one that could see me. But at least nobody doubts your sense of things, Cheetara.”

Only I do, she thought to herself with a measure of misery.

“Well, you shouldn’t,” came Lion-O’s reply, and Cheetara startled, wondering if she’d spoken aloud absentmindedly. Lion-O chuckled softly at her reaction. “It’s this place,” he explained. “It’s lent me a little extra sensory power, too.”

Not even she could practically read a mind, and Cheetara didn’t know whether to be frightened or impressed. It was best to get back on the urgent subject at hand, she decided. “What about Grune? What is that traitorous rogue up to now?”

“It’s funny, Jaga thought this place would shield me from knowing what’s going on in your world, but if I concentrate just right, I hear the right whisper on the wind. And what I heard lately isn’t good. I knew he was trouble before, but now I know why.”

Cheetara felt an unpleasant tingle making its way up her spine. She didn’t like where this was going already.

“For the first time,” Lion-O continued, “Mumm-Ra and the Mutants, along with Grune, have patched together an alliance that may hold. That would be bad news on any day, but what’s worse is Mumm-Ra is more powerful than ever. And he senses Tygra’s doubts. Plus, he knows about Tygra’s plan to challenge Bengali unarmed in a Trial. Cheetara, that will be the Thundercats undoing. You have to stop him somehow.”

Cheetara gasped. Sure she’d thought the idea wasn’t the best, but in light of this new information, now definitely wasn’t the time for any of them to let their guard down – no matter what anyone’s assurances were of extra vigilance and protection on the perimeter. Their enemies had never stopped bickering amongst themselves long enough to present a dangerous united front.

She looked into Lion-O’s eyes and any response she’d had died on her lips. He looked suddenly frail and spent, and she knew the effort this had taken was draining him faster by the instant. Lion-O removed his hand from her shoulder, and as he did, he began fading from her view.

“Thank you, Lion-O. I won’t let you down,” she vowed to his shrinking form. *We miss you*, she added keeping the sentiment as a thought, her aching heart too wounded yet to give it a voice.

The mist around her felt suddenly leaden. A sensation came over her, making her feel as if she couldn’t breathe. Panic brought her out of her fitful slumber and she awoke, sweaty and gasping, in the dawn-lit bedroom inside the Lair. Remembering her former Lord’s urgent message, she turned to where Tygra would be lying beside her. Cheetara’s heart sank when she saw he was not there.

“No. By Thundera I hope he’s not already out there,” she muttered as she sprang out of bed and quickly donned her suit.

“I’ve got to find Tygra fast,” she said to herself with conviction while trotting out the door. “Before something unpleasant does!”

At least she did ‘fast’ well, breaking into a full run before she had even left the main entrance to the Lair.

Are you here forever standin' by the road

With the benefit of feelin' on your own

Where the river ends the sun is comin' down
Through the vision valley waiting to be found

--Vision Valley, The Vines