

# **All Good Things**

The sequel to 'Breaking the Code'

By Spaced Angel

## **Chapter Six: Sacrifice**

After a long search, Tygra found Cheetara hard at work in the exercise room. No surprise there, he reflected. For someone who had been in a coma with a 'fractured mind' only four and a half months before, her recovery had been remarkable. The Ursan healers had monitored her progress with interest and were amazed that she had been able to achieve so much in so short a time. They stopped short of declaring it a miracle - a step too far for a race that held science to be the answer to all things - yet that was clearly what it was.

Watching her now, moving lithely from beam to beam on the training bars, he found himself guiltily envying her restored capabilities. The injury to his leg had left the tendons weakened and he had been forced to sit on the sidelines while Panthro took his place and sparred with Cheetara in their mock battles. At times he had to admit to a little jealousy that he could not join her. At others, he was glad he was at a safe distance. As her strength had grown, he had noticed that with it came a change. She fought viciously and with greater confidence than he remembered. Frequently now was Panthro beaten down to his knees and left reeling by the force of her attack. Tygra could not shake the impression that in the heat of battle, she was as one possessed. This was not the Cheetara of old. There was no mercy or concern in her actions, just an overwhelming desire to win whatever the cost.

He had confided his doubts to Panthro, who had dismissed them without a second thought. She was glad to be alive, he had said, and making the most of every moment. What was wrong with that? Nothing, Tygra had to concede. What Panthro did not know, however, was how deep this change ran. There was distance between them now and Cheetara seemed unwilling or perhaps unable to return to the closeness they had once shared.

He had not expected her to pick up the pieces of her old life so easily and he understood that it would take time, just as it had for him. He had not rushed her and had borne her coldness with patience. When finally she sought him out and aggressively re-initiated physical relations, he had been left feeling empty from the experience. It had been the same ever since, making love almost mechanically to meet a base need rather than for any comfort in romance and intimacy. It had got to the point where he dreaded her demands. He shared his bed with a stranger, who took what she wanted and left him in tatters.

Just as she had done tonight.

He waited while she somersaulted from the high beam and landed lightly on her feet. She came to rest with perfect poise and he watched the rise and fall of her shoulders as she drew breath and restored her equilibrium. Finally, his patience was rewarded by a cursory glance in his direction.

"Oh, it's you," she said, wandering over the bench to collect a towel. Wiping her face and neck, she kept her back to him while she spoke. "What do you want?"

"I missed you," he said.

"You were asleep."

There it was again, the remark laced with enough disdain to make it into an accusation.

"It is the middle of the night, Cheetara."

As a defence, it would have suited a normal person, but he knew he would have to do much better than that with Cheetara.

"Why are you here?"

She shrugged. "I couldn't sleep."

"So, you thought you'd work off your aggression instead."

She spun round to face him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Don't you know?"

"If you've got any complaints, tiger, let's hear them."

The last thing in the world he wanted was to argue with her, but the constant needling was driving him to distraction. His patience snapped and he put his frustration into words.

"Why are you doing this? What have I done to deserve this treatment?"

The light of anger faded in her eyes. In its place came dullness and she moved deliberately away from him to put space between them. He felt the nip of his conscience and regretted his hasty words. All his promises not to hurt her had evaporated in one foolish loss of control. He had never pressed her on what she remembered of the events of that day, always supposing she would come to him in her own time. If she did remember, he knew it must plague her every hour as it did his. Raking up the past was to open old wounds. The look that came into her eyes confirmed that he had done exactly that.

"Cheetara, I'm sorry," he said with a sigh. "I didn't mean to..."

"Yes, you did," she said accusingly. "You want to know what you did? You lied to me, Tygra. You said you would be there for me. I kept hoping you would return. Even when my mind was falling apart, I put my faith in you. 'He will come,' I told myself." She shook her head. "You never did. Why?"

He stared at her, suddenly realising the source of her distress, the burden she had carried all this time. If she thought that, then she had every right to hate him. "I was on my way, believe me. By the time I got there, she--"

"She has a name!" Cheetara yelled. "Don't pretend you don't know who was responsible for this!"

"All right then, by the time I got there, Jageena was waiting for me. I was overwhelmed. I tried, but there was nothing I could do."

"And after that?"

"After?" He shrugged helplessly. "Cheetara, I was mortally injured, bleeding all over floor. What did you want me to do?"

"Don't play stupid with me! The Ursans told me about the memory probe, Tygra. You knew who did this to us." She snorted, mingling anger and contempt. "All these months, I've said nothing because I didn't know how much you remembered. I thought I was doing you a favour. Now I find you knew all along. And what have you done about it? Nothing!"

The towel she had been using ended up in a crumpled mass at his feet.

"You've been content to hide here and let others do your dirty work for you! Coward!"

"That's not fair," he retorted. "I had Cyan's safety to consider."

"You hide behind that child! You use him to cover up your own inadequacies." She shook her head. "I knew I would never be able to rely on you. I gave up everything for you - my kin, my family, my life. What have you ever given me in return?"

He was too stunned to reply. Her words struck him to the core.

"Don't just stand there! Say something!"

"I have always loved you," he began. "What happened that day--"

"Made me realise that you will always let me down. You *used* me."

"How can you say that? We have a son."

"*You* have a son," she said. "I have... nothing."

He inwardly winced at the regret in her voice. The reunion of mother and son had not been going well. Cyan had rejected her attempts to bond with him by squalling and crying whenever she picked him up, as if he feared this stranger who tried to show him affection. Tygra had wondered

if he too was picking up on her peculiar mood. Certainly he could understand the child's nervousness in her presence; he was feeling a little of it right now.

"Cheetara, please," he said, plucking up his courage to approach her with outstretched arms. "Will you at least let me explain?"

She held her position and defied him with her eyes to invade her personal space. He stopped just short of doing so and took her silence as an invitation to continue.

"If I had known where Jageena was, I would have gone after her. But what could I do? No one knows where she is. Not even the Sword of Omens has been able to discover her whereabouts."

"I know."

The statement took him by surprise. "You do? How?"

"Like you care!"

She pushed past him and made for the door. On an impulse, he grabbed her arm and stopped her. The look she gave him would have turned lava to ice and he reluctantly relinquished his hold. Free once more, she stalked away without looking back.

"What then?" he called after her. "When you've had your revenge, what then?"

The question made her pause. "I'm not making any plans," she said quietly.

"But you are going to kill her?"

"Of course." She half-turned and offered him a weak smile. "After all, she tried to kill me. It's only fair that I return the favour."

"Is that what a Thundercat would do?"

She said nothing and returned to the safety of not having to either accept or acknowledge his question by staring blankly out of the open doorway. He sensed that if he could reach her at all, now would be the time. He limped over to where she stood and gently placed his hand on her shoulder. Her response was lightning fast. No sooner had she jerked away from his touch than he felt his feet being taken from under him by a smarting blow to his lower legs. He fell awkwardly, his weaker leg buckling and twisting uncomfortably beneath him, and ended up on his back with the tip of her staff inches from his nose.

"Stay out of my way!" Rage brought spots of red to her cheeks. "I won't warn you again. Oh, by the way..." She plucked the insignia she wore from her top and threw it at him. It landed on his chest and bounced onto the floor. "Give my regards to Lion-O. I don't need other people to fight my battles."

This time she did leave, striding from the room to be swallowed up in the darkness of the corridor beyond. Determined to follow her, Tygra dragged himself to his knees, ignoring the ache of his leg, and tried to push himself up. Pain as sharp as a twisting knife ran up his leg and brought him back down to the floor. It hurt, but was nothing like the sting of Cheetara's accusations. Now she was gone and had left him far behind, injured again and helpless to stop her. But he knew someone who could.

Inch after painful inch, he crawled to the wall and dragged himself upright until he was within reach of the intercom. Activating it, a gruffly officious voice came across the channel, inquiring which department he wanted. A few seconds later, he had been put through to a bedroom several floors above and waited until a sleepy voice answered.

"Panthro," he said, "it's Cheetara. She's gone."

"Gone?" The switch from sleepiness to wakefulness was instantaneous. "Where?"

"She said she was going after Jageena. You have to stop her."

"Of all the stubborn..." he heard Panthro grumble. "Okay, I'll find her. Are you all right? You sound a little hoarse."

"I had an accident. I've torn a hamstring."

"Want me to send for the medics?"

"No, I'll do it. Find Cheetara. And Panthro? Be careful. She's not herself."

He met with a snort of laughter. "Tell me about it. I've got the bruises to prove it. Don't worry. I'll take care of this. Panthro, out."

As the communicator clicked into silence, Tygra let gravity pull him back to the floor. Something hard dug in the back of his thigh and a quick investigation revealed Cheetara's discarded Thundercat insignia. He took it up and stared at it. What she had done was illogical. They had fought so hard to regain their standing as Thundercats and yet she had thrown it all away, along with him. She had received the greatest gift of all - her life restored - and she had all too easily turned her back on it. For what, he wondered. A forlorn hope of finding Jageena and getting revenge. It was stupid and futile, yet he wished with all his heart that he could have gone with her.

He closed his fingers around her insignia and shut his eyes, remembering her harsh words. Perhaps she was right. Perhaps he was an inadequate coward. Even now he was letting Panthro do the work while he languished here, in pain and alone with the thought of what a poor father Cyan had, poorer still now he had lost Cheetara.

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The space dock was alive with activity even at this early hour. Panthro sauntered between the rows of crates, taking his time to scan the milling crowds. Everyone was in a hurry, dashing to and fro, shouting orders, checking dockets, counting in cargo. His own pace, however, was rather more leisurely. What was the hurry? There was only one place where Cheetara could have gone and from there she had few other options.

It came as no surprise when he came upon the Feliner and found its aft doors open, from where issued some of Thundera's finer curses. Drawing a little closer, he found Cheetara bent over a mass of electrical circuitry, prodding here and there with a laser probe.

"Lost something?"

She abruptly straightened up and eyed the condenser on his outstretched palm. She reached for it, but he snatched his hand away.

"Give it to me," she said. "I want it!"

Panthro nodded. "I want a week in the sun, but I doubt I'll be getting it any time soon."

She scowled at him and slammed the aft door shut. "Tygra told you, I suppose?"

"He did mention it."

"I'm going. Don't try to stop me."

"I wouldn't," said Panthro. "But I will be coming with you."

That stopped her in her tracks. "What?"

He considered the small lump of plastic in his hand. "It's my condenser. I feel a certain attachment to it. Where it goes, so do I." He closed his fingers around it again in case she had any idea of trying to take it from him. "Where *are* you going, by the way?"

"None of your business," she growled.

"Really? I've not heard of that planet. Is it nice there this time of year?"

Her hostility faded like snow before the sun and she managed a slight smile. "Did he tell you why?"

"You're going after Jageena."

Again she held out her hand and still he refused her request.

"Isn't that a good enough reason?" she said.

"Frankly, no. It's been tried, Cheetara. What makes you think you can succeed where we've failed?"

She sighed and sank down beside one of the Feliner's struts. "I have to do this, Panthro. It's all I think about. Until I do something about it, I'll never be free."

"Free of what... or whom?"

She looked sharply up at him. "What do you mean?"

He sat down beside her with a grunt of relief at taking the weight off his legs. "I'm getting old, Cheetara, but I'm not so senile that I haven't noticed the change in you. Occasionally, I get flashes of the old you, but it's like you're a different person. It's Jade, isn't it?"

She held his gaze for a long minute before looking away and nodding. "I hear her, Panthro. It's like she's in my head with me."

"I knew she was up to something. I don't pretend to understand this psychic nonsense of yours, but I know underhand dealing when I see it."

"She saved my life."

"And meddled with your mind."

Cheetara nodded. "It just so happens that our intent is the same. She knows where Jageena is and through her so do I. She wants revenge and... so do I. Once we've both got what we want, then can we be at peace."

"Peace comes at a price," Panthro said. "Are you willing to pay it?"

"It might not come to that," she said, staring down at her hands.

"Don't be stupid," he said, grabbing her by the shoulders and making her look at him. "She's backed by the Ancient Spirits of Evil, Cheetara. They won't let you get anywhere near her."

She pushed his hands away and jumped to her feet. "So what do I do? Walk away, like Tygra did, and pretend nothing happened? That she didn't try to kill me and my unborn child in our own home? Do you really expect me to just forget that, Panthro?"

"No," he said calmly. "But killing her isn't the answer. She has more blood than yours on her hands."

"Lexi, you mean? Yes, I know. But if you know that, why are you trying to stop me?"

With effort, he got to his feet and faced her. "I'll come with you, Cheetara. I'll even help you capture her. But I'll have no part in her death. Jageena has to be brought to trial for her crimes.

Once she is gone, perhaps this group she heads calling themselves the Sons of Thundera will fall too. Killing her will only make her a martyr for their cause." He held out his hand to her. "Do we have a deal?"

Cheetara hesitated and finally accepted. "Truth is, Panthro, I expected this."

Panthro grinned. "You didn't have much choice, spots. I'd alerted the dock authorities that you might come down here looking for a ship."

"I wondered why no one would take me."

"That left you only one option," he said, gesturing to the Feliner. "I remove the condenser every night as a matter of course, just in case an adventurous young cub by the name of WilyKat decides to take the Feliner out to impress his girlfriend. Speaking of which, how long will this little escapade take? I'd like to give him some idea of when I'll return."

"Soon," Cheetara said. "We have to do this now or not at all."

"Up against the clock, are we?"

"Something like that."

"Right," he said, unconvinced by her reply. "Let's make a move. I'll send WilyKat a message when we're in flight. You want to let Tygra know?"

She shook her head. "He'll only worry."

"You know he's hurt?"

"Yes. I did it." She bit her lip and cautiously glanced up at him. "I had to stop him following me. Cyan needs him."

"Doesn't he need his mother too?"

In answer, she looked away. If she thought that hid her true feelings, then Panthro ached to tell her that she was mistaken.

"Well, you'll be back before he knows you're gone," he said, tossing her the condenser. "Here, fit this back in its rightful place and let's get this show on the road."

She disappeared around the other side of the Feliner and he watched the progress of her legs as she went to an inspection hatch and set about reattaching the missing condenser. The thought flashed briefly through his mind that she could still outwit him. The Feliner was now space worthy and she could easily use her speed to get to the cockpit and lock him out. Deciding it was not a risk worth taking, he clambered up and took his usual seat at the controls. Five minutes later, Cheetara joined him.

Noting his readiness, she smiled. "Still don't trust me?"

"No point hanging about, is there?" he said, not quite ready to admit to his lingering doubts. "Let's go."

The cockpit hatch slid smoothly into place and a faint hiss sounded from the hydraulics as it came to rest. Within seconds of the communicator signal reaching Central Control, the floor beneath the Feliner was parting to allow the ship to descend into the departure dock under the main hangar. The countdown started and Panthro primed the Feliner's engines, ready for the moment when the ship was flung out into space. When zero was reached, a succession of coloured lights rippled on the floor, heralding the moment of flight. With the thunderous roar of the dock's propulsion systems sounding in his ears, Panthro felt his head thrust back against the headrest of seat. From light into darkness, the Feliner was thrust out into the vast emptiness of space with only the distant stars for company. As momentum died away, the ship's engines came to life and Feliner sped away under her own power.

"Well, are you gonna tell me where we're headed or am I gonna have to guess?" he asked, turning to his co-pilot. He was slightly concerned to see Cheetara in the process of popping two green pills into her mouth. She quickly swallowed them and cast a guilty look in his direction. "Something you haven't told me?" he asked.

"Painkillers," she said, stowing the bottle back in her bag and dropping it behind her seat.

"For what? I thought you were over all that."

"I had a minor operation earlier. It's nothing to worry about. It won't slow me down. It's..." She paused and smiled at some secret knowledge she was not about to share. "Something I owe a friend."

Panthro gave a low whistle. "Must be one special friend."

"Yes, she is. You wanted our heading?"

She reached over to the navigation computer and entered the co-ordinates. The ship veered abruptly to change course and settled into a steady flight. Panthro glanced at the image of their destination on the navigation viewer and could make nothing of it. A blue planet marked with large slabs of white landmasses, unremarkable except for the slight sparkle that seemed to shimmer at its outer edges, revolving quietly against an endless sea of black.

"Seems familiar somehow," Panthro said thoughtfully.

"It should be," said Cheetara. "It's the ice moon of Plun-darr."

The breath left his mouth without forming into words and it took him a minute to regain his composure. "Are you crazy?" Her expression never wavered. "Are you even sure about this?"

"This is where Jade says Jageena will be."

Panthro snorted. "Said a lot of things, that girl. Don't know that I entirely trusted her." He glanced over at Cheetara to find that she was staring out of the cabin window at a passing comet. "Was there any truth in anything she said, d'you think?"

Cheetara dragged her attention away from the astral traveller and held his gaze. "You're asking me if her predictions will come true?" Her eyebrows twitched upwards a fraction. "I do not have her powers, Panthro, only her understanding. What she said is what she believed to be the truth."

Panthro considered her words, wondering how much she was keeping from him. "She asked me how far I would go for a friend." He gestured to his surroundings. "I guess we know now."

"Is that why you insisted on coming? To prove Jade wrong?"

"I think you know me better than that."

She held his gaze unwaveringly. "Yes, I do. I just wonder why you're so worried about what other people think of you."

"That never worries you?"

"Not any more," she said, looking away. "That ceased to be a concern the day my own people turned their backs on me. Besides, I have other things to worry about now."

She fell silent, leaving Panthro to wonder what those 'other things' might be. Certainly their mission, but what else? Deciding it was little use worrying until they happened, he set the ship on autopilot and settled down for the long journey to Plun-darrian space.

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In many ways, Plun-darr's ice moon had a beauty all of its own. Over the frozen ocean, great spires of ice created a haphazard crystal city that sparkled from the light of the distant sun. Too far away for its rays to have much effect on the perpetual covering of snow that lay across the featureless landscape, Cheetara noted that the Feliner's sensors were registering temperatures of minus twenty degrees. It was cold out there, colder even than Hook Mountain, colder than the heart sheltered somewhere within its icy domain.

That Jageena was here she did not doubt for a second. It was a conviction that allowed no space for hesitation or pause to judge the veracity of her actions. The voice of a dead girl echoed in her mind, insistent, demanding to be heard. Over and over, it had driven her to the point of distraction where all her efforts had been focused on the fulfilment of the revenge that had made them kin of intent. Her whole existence had contracted to a narrow concentration on regaining her fitness and going after that witch. It had come at no small cost. She had known the agony of muscles pushed beyond their physical capabilities, of hands that had bled from hours of staff

practice, of a child that shrank from her very touch, of the look on Tygra's face when she spurned his best efforts and poured scorn upon him.

She squeezed her eyes tightly shut, trying to block out the memory of his expression the last time she had seen him. He had been his usual self, trying to apply logic and reason to a situation that she could neither explain nor rationalise. Of course it was madness; she was not blind to the dangers. Here she was in enemy territory, chasing a person who had the backing of the Ancient Spirits of Evil and power enough to reduce her to so much dust at the flick of her hand. If not for Jade's reassurances that justice would find a way, she knew she would have turned back long ago. Even those promises seemed slim, however; justice was a fine concept, but it would take more than a few words to make it happen.

If truth were told, Cheetara came to the conclusion that fulfilling it would cost her not just her sanity, but her very life.

Not that she would be losing much, she consoled herself. What life had Jageena left her anyway? Her baby shrank from her presence and Tygra must surely now despise her. Just as well, she told herself. Better that only one of them die here today rather than leave Cyan an orphan. She wondered if he would ever understand that her words had been calculated in their venom, that she had sought to drive him away. Even physically injuring him had been for his own good. Strange, she reflected, how it was sometimes necessary to be cruel to be kind.

Which reminded her of her other problem.

Panthro was a harder case and she was not sure that a few harsh words were going to work on him as easily as they had on Tygra. He had insisted on coming and had extracted from her a promise she knew she could not keep. Telling him to mind his own business would have little effect. Tenacious to a fault was Panthro. It was a trait that was likely to get him killed.

Some sense told him of her stare and he glanced over to meet her eyes. "Last minute doubts?" he said. "Just say the word and we're outta here, Cheetara."

She smiled and shook her head. "No, this is the right place."

"Damn, I thought you'd say that. Did I mention this is crazy?"

"Several times, Panthro." She drew a deep breath and stared out of the cabin window. "You don't have to come, you know."

"And let you have all the fun without me?"

She could almost hear the smile in his voice. "Panthro, I'm serious."

"So am I. You forget, I've an interest in seeing Jageena brought to justice too."

"Even if our interpretations of that concept are rather different?"

"She's not worth killing, Cheetara." A slight pause ensued. "Nor is she worth you throwing away your life."

The remark made her look back at him. "What makes you say that?"

He gave a snort. "That's what you're planning, isn't it? That's why you stopped Tygra coming with you and why you tried to stop me." He finally took his gaze from the forward viewscreen to glance over at her. "I won't let you do it, Cheetara."

"I hadn't planned--"

"Yes, you had. If not, what's the plan? Walk straight into the enemy's lair and expect them to surrender without a fight?"

"Not exactly."

"Then what?"

To tell him that she was confident that whatever happened, Jageena and her reign of terror would end this day would hardly be enough. But that was all she had, a strong, unshakeable belief that justice would be done. It had to be so, or else why was she here, risking everything?

"Just trust me," she said, deciding that further argument was futile. Whatever she did, she was sure Panthro would continue to stick close to her side. She only wished he was not so steadfast in his loyalty.

The peak of a snow-covered mountain caught her attention and the little voice that whispered constantly in her ear told her that she had arrived. Panthro obligingly changed course and the ship descended to weave amongst the snowy rocks. Drawing closer, Cheetara could see an opening in the base of the rock, big enough to take a ship. Panthro said nothing about the inadvisability of going into enemy territory, but gave her that look she knew all too well. He was not happy about the situation, he had made himself very clear on that subject. All the same, it was his choice to come. He knew as well as she did what might lie in wait in that gloomy cavern. It was foolish, yes, but she was glad he was there.

The ship entered the cavern and landed neatly on a lit runway. Snow from the outside world had crept in, covering the lights set into the floor, so that they sparkled beneath an icy layer like trapped stars. To her relief, there was no one about. In fact, the place had the air of desertion, as though whoever lived here had long since ceased to do so. No one to come rushing out to confront the intruders, no one to sweep the snow away from the runway lights and no one to sound the emergency sirens to warn of a breach of security. The place was cold and neglected.

"Sure we're in the right place?" Panthro asked, glancing out of the Feliner's cabin window. "Doesn't look like anyone lives here any more."

Cheetara was inclined to agree, but the need to continue having come this far was so intense that she crushed her misgivings and set about collecting her things from the rear of the ship. Reaching for the cloak she had stowed behind her seat, she felt a twinge of pain from the stitches in her side. Mindful that tearing them apart was not desirable, she stopped what she was doing and tried again with more care than before. Only when she straightened up was she aware that Panthro was watching her. She could see the concern in his eyes but it was no use trying to explain. If he had trouble with what she was doing now, telling him that she had willingly mutilated herself was hardly going to be any easier.

Out of the ship, the air was chilling and her breath left smoke trails behind her. The feeling that something was very wrong here was growing beyond reasonable proportions. This place should be teeming with people, she knew. They should have been met the moment they touched down and be in custody right now, dragged before Jageena to face her wrath. But the hangar knew only silence, broken occasional by the crunch of their footfalls on the icy ground.

"This is weird," said Panthro, wandering over to join her. "Look at his place. The lights are still on and the systems are functioning. It's as though everyone downed tools quickly and left." He pulled his cloak a little closer around him and blew on his hands. "I think we can do no better than follow their good example and leave right now."

Again, she knew he was right, but still that nagging voice told her to go on. "Let's look around," she said. "See if we can find out what happened here."

As Panthro had said, the systems were still running enough to sense her presence and open the sliding door out of the hangar at her approach. A long corridor led away in both directions, lit by electric lamps fitted to the walls. Their light seemed a little dimmer than normal, perhaps because no one had bothered to check on their supply of fuel. If they were running down, it meant that this place must have been abandoned for many months.

The first door she came to opened into what seemed to be a centre of operations. A large view screen dominated one wall of the room and banks of blinking lights stood to either side. In the middle stood a glass-topped table and on it was a hologram projector.

"Do we dare?" said Panthro, his finger hovering over the power button for the device.

"I don't see why not."

He pressed the button and the image of a planet appeared, immediately recognisable to both of them as Thundera. "This is where they do their plotting obviously," Panthro muttered. "I wonder what other surprises lay in wait for us." He rounded the table and came to an abrupt halt. "Cheetara, look at this."

She soon discovered the reason for his pause. Sprawled on the floor were two bodies, laying face up, their eyes forever fixed on a now unseen distant horizon.

"They're a long way from home," Panthro said, gesturing to the stripes and deep red colouring that marked them out as tigers.

"Members of Jageena's band no doubt."

Panthro grunted. "The Sons of Thundera." He reached out and touched the face of one of the bodies. "Frozen solid. Impossible to tell how long they've been here."

"How did they die?"

"Can't tell. There's no marks on either of the bodies."

Cheetara sighed with frustration. This was getting them nowhere. She had been led here with the promise of answers, but all she had got so far were more questions. What had happened here? Who or what had killed these people? And most importantly, where was Jageena?

"The computers," she said, "they might tell us when this happened."

Panthro got to his feet without comment and set to work making the central computer give up its secrets until finally the main screen filled with a list of log entries, most detailing routine tasks and notes for general maintenance. On the last day for which there was an entry, all systems had been reported as functioning normally and a work memo had been attached for an overhaul of the drainage systems.

"Seems all pretty straightforward to me," said Panthro. "Nothing there too controversial."

But it was not what had been recorded that held Cheetara's eye. "Panthro, look at the date."

"That's almost five months ago. So..." He hesitated, the significance suddenly hitting him. "Great Jaga," he whispered, "that's the date when Jade brought you out of that coma."

Cheetara nodded. "The question is, did that cause this?"

"You think they abandoned the base because they thought Jade might have given you information about them?"

"Well, she did. But this isn't abandoned, Panthro. This is a tomb."

His gaze wandered down to the two bodies. "A mass suicide? That's crazy."

"I don't know. Let's see what else we can find."

The control centre set a pattern for every other room they entered. Bodies scattered across floors and tables and sprawled in chairs, as though life for them had suddenly ceased to exist. Whatever had happened had taken them by surprise and it showed in their lifeless, staring eyes. With no

hand on the heating controls, the temperature had plummeted and preserved their bodies. Unless someone gave them a decent burial, here they would remain for all eternity.

As one room after another gave up its grisly secrets, she could sense Panthro's growing unease and had no argument when he suggested it was time to leave. She was about to follow him when the faintest sound caught her attention. Half-moan, half-sob, it seemed to originate from behind two massive double doors that had defied their attempts to open them when they had first passed by this way. A little persuasion made Panthro give it another try and he threw the full force of his weight against the doors. With sweat pouring down his face from the effort, finally the doors gave a grudging groan and conceded defeat. Ice fell from them as they creaked open and gave entrance into a lofty chamber, startling in its warmth compared to the rest of the base. Where other rooms had been spartan, this was opulent in the extreme. Mirrors lined the walls and crystal chandeliers lit the way to a dais at the far end upon which was a gold throne. On the carpet-lined steps was a huddled figure, weeping into the folds of the cloak wrapped loosely around her.

Although the face was hidden from sight, Cheetara had no doubt that this lone survivor in the midst of so much death was Jageena. The urge to approach her was irresistible. Even when Panthro caught her sleeve and tried to hold her back, she pressed on. The closer she grew, the greater her trepidation, but also the greater her curiosity. If anyone knew what had happened here, surely she would.

Reaching her side, she extended her hand to pluck the material from the bowed head to reveal the face. For a moment, she hesitated, torn between revulsion for the woman who had tried twice to kill her and fascination at her plight. Her fingers curled back from touching her and she had to force them out to take a hold of the fabric and pull it back. Her guess had not been wrong. Long matted hair hung like bootlaces around the down-turned face and her clothes were dirty and torn. She wept on, unaware that she had been discovered and it was only when Cheetara called her name that she slowly turned her head to look up.

Jageena, once Divine Mistress of the Jaguars of Thundera, blinked up at her through tear-heavy lashes. Her scarred face was puffy from crying and streaked with traces of make-up. Her eyes were wild, unable to fix on anything for longer than two seconds before flitting off in another direction. This was not the woman Cheetara remembered, cold of heart and utterly confident in her abilities. This Jageena was a broken wreck, shaking and gibbering inanely to herself, stripped of her treasures, fine clothes and dignity.

"What's happened to her?" Panthro said when he joined her. "She looks half crazed."

"Yes, she does," murmured Cheetara. Kneeling down in front of her, she caught Jageena's face between her hands and forced her to look at her. Still the eyes danced from side to side and her breathing came in short, panicked gasps. "Jageena, what happened here?"

Her mouth opened and closed several times before she was able to utter an answer. "Gone," she whispered. "All gone. They left me."

"Is she talking about her followers? Think we should tell her they're still here?"

Cheetara shook her head and returned to her interrogation. "Who left you, Jageena?"

"She was ill," she said, that wild look of terror returning to her eyes. "They wouldn't help her. But I did. I saved her."

"Help who? Who are you talking about?"

In answer, Jageena started to rock back and forth. Cheetara had no option but to release her. Sitting back, she watched and listened to her ramblings, feeling her insides knot with disgust as she realised she was being to feel pity for this person who she knew she should hate more than anyone in the whole universe. Whatever she had told Panthro, she had come intending to kill Jageena, to protect Cyan and Tygra. She had been ready to give up her life if it meant that this evil woman would threaten them no longer. Yet now, she found she had not the heart to carry out the sentence. If any trace of the evil that had once driven Jageena remained, it was buried under the cloak of insanity that hung about her mind.

"What do you want to do?" Panthro asked.

"I don't know. I really don't."

"We can't leave her here."

"No." Taking Jageena by the arms, Cheetara again forced her to concentrate on her questions. "Where is the child?"

The sweetest smile curled the jaguar's lips. "Sleeping, so peacefully." She traced an invisible picture in the air with her forefinger. "So ill, my little girl. They would not help her. But I did. I saved her. Come, look!"

She pulled away from Cheetara's grasp and dashed up the steps. From behind the throne, she dragged out a tiny crib and gestured to them to come closer. Panthro began to ascend the steps, only to pause and look back when Cheetara did not join him.

"You coming?" he asked.

There was no answer to that, at least not one she felt comfortable with making public. This child was as much a part of her as it was Jageena. The unnatural method of its conception did not change that fact. She tried not to think too much about how the reunion of jaguar powers with those they claimed the cheetahs had stolen in this child had almost rendered her infertile and nearly cost her life. As curious as she was, she dreaded seeing this infant, being as it was an eternal reminder of what had been done to her.

"Panthro, I can't."

He continued to wait.

"I'm sorry, I just can't. Not yet."

"You'll have to sooner or later. Jageena's in no fit state to care for her."

She had considered that possibility too. If nurture could win out over the evil nature of one of her parents, then it was her duty to try. Or at the very least to pass her care over to someone who could.

"Yes, I know. But not now."

She stayed where she was, until finally Panthro gave up the battle of wills and continued up the steps. Cheetara turned her back on the scene, sure that Panthro would try to win her over by lifting the infant from her crib and make her face her daughter. She kept her gaze carefully averted when suddenly a sharp intake of breath made her turn round to see what had happened. Jageena was bent over the crib, cooing gently to the child, but all the colour had drained from Panthro's face and he was reeling back from the pair. Cheetara raced up the steps to his side to see what had happened.

"The child," he said hoarsely. "Take a look."

His tone was enough to convince her that this was no trick. Cautiously, she approached the crib and glanced down at the small mound beneath the sheets. A thick scrub of yellow hair protruded from beneath the blanket and Cheetara could feel her stomach clenching at the thought of what she might find when the sheets were drawn back. Was the child so like her that Panthro had been shocked by the resemblance? Steeling herself for what she was about to see, she took hold of the edge of the blanket and carefully removed it.

"Great Jaga," she whispered to herself. "Jageena, what have you done?"

Loving clothed in the prettiest pink dress and booties was a pile of bones. Traces of dried skin could be seen clinging to ribs and on several of the fingers, the nails were still attached. Only the scalp remained attached to the head; any trace of her features had long since decayed to nothing. All these months, Jageena had been tending a corpse.

"Isn't she beautiful?" she said, tickling the tiny skeleton under the chin. "She was so ill, but mummy saved you, didn't she, darling?"

Sick to the pit of her stomach, Cheetara retreated to where Panthro stood. "Did she... do this, do you think?"

A little of the colour had returned to his face, although he still looked as though he was ready to throw up. "Not even Jageena would kill her own daughter. You heard what she said, *'they wouldn't help her'*."

"Who?"

"Either her followers or the Ancient Spirits of Evil. Does it matter? The child died and it drove Jageena over the edge. I think she killed everyone here in a fit of grief."

"Why would the Ancient Spirits let the child die? They were responsible for its conception."

"You'd have to ask Mumm-ra about their fickle nature. Looks like Jageena found that out too late."

"But the timing, Panthro." Cheetara looked back to the pathetic sight of Jageena fussing over her dead daughter. "You don't think I'm responsible?"

He shook his head. "No power on earth could have saved that child once the Ancient Spirits withdrew their support, for *whatever* reason."

She appreciated his show of confidence, yet a horrible certainty gnawed away at her guts that her return to life had brought about this devastation. Had they known her intention right from the start, to end Jageena's reign and take the child away from their control? If so, had they chosen to end it themselves, denying all of victory? If what she suspected was true, in that one callous act, they had condemned all within this base. Jageena, in her desperation to save her dying daughter, had called upon what powers remained to her. Instead of bringing life, they had brought death and this place had become a tomb, for the dead and the one living soul remaining. No wonder Jageena had lost her mind.

"Jade," she murmured. "This is why she brought me here, to show me this. She knew this would happen."

Panthro stroked his chin and considered. "She was certain someone would try to stop her. If the Ancient Spirits knew what she was intending, that might have forced their hand. Even so, Cheetara, that is their responsibility, not yours."

There was truth in his words. However, it did not lessen the swell of guilt taking hold of her gut. Whatever her own feelings, the child had not been responsible for the sins of Jageena. Until anyone proved otherwise, she was an innocent and Cheetara felt grief for a young life lost so needlessly.

With effort, she swallowed her tears. There would time enough for them later. "What now?" she asked Panthro.

"We take Jageena with us."

"Why?"

"We can't leave her here. Look at her," he said, gesturing to where she still knelt beside the crib, staring lovingly at its grisly contents. "We may have both come here seeking revenge, but no jury is ever going to convict her now. She isn't the same person, you must see that. We have to take her back to Thundera where she can get the care she needs."

"Then what? Put her in some institution for the criminally insane? You said yourself she will escape punishment for her crimes."

Panthro shook his head slowly. "I think this is punishment enough for anyone." He took a few steps towards her and, reaching her side, laid his hand on hers. "Time to go now, Jageena."

She looked up at him with such gratitude that for the first time in Cheetara's memory she saw the jaguar smile. "You came back," she whispered. "I knew you would. Come, we must take her to safety before she comes."

"Who comes, Jageena?" Panthro asked.

"The spotted one," she hissed, glancing round warily. "Her and her disgusting friends. I killed her once, did you know that?"

"Yes."

"But she wouldn't die, oh, no, not her, not *her*. They said I had failed and because of that, she would come. That is why they left."

"The Ancient Spirits of--"

Jageena put a finger to her lips. "Shush, they might be listening. They will return, I know it."

"There's no one here," said Panthro kindly. "Come, Jageena, it's time to go."

As he took her hand from the rail of the crib, she let out a wail. Panthro promptly released her and she snatched up the tiny bundle of bones and held them close to her breast. "You're trying to take her away from me," she yelled. "I won't let you!"

As fast as any cheetah, she scuttled behind the dais and disappeared.

"Talk about not making things any easier," said Panthro. "Let's find her before she gets into trouble."

The trail was not hard to follow. In her wake, Jageena had left a trail of bones. These Panthro dutifully picked up without comment and wrapped reverently in his cloak. Feeling Cheetara's inquiring gaze upon him, he glanced over at her as he retrieved a tiny leg bone.

"She'll get a proper funeral when we get back to Thundera," he said. "It's the least we can do for her."

"I agree," said Cheetara. "But don't you think we should find Jageena first?"

"How far can she go?"

Cheetara rubbed her upper arms. "It's getting rather cold in here, don't you think?"

Panthro caught the implication of her words. "You think she's found a way to get outside?"

He dropped the bundle he was carrying and started at a run down the corridor. As Cheetara had suspected, rounding the next corner, they found a door slightly ajar. Snow was piling in through the gap, showing that this was the entrance to the outside world.

A blizzard had blown up and in the distance she could make out a snow-blurred figure. Her speed was no advantage in these conditions, but she still gained ground on Jageena. Calling out to her only made the jaguar hurry her pace until she came to the edge of the mountain and had to stop. With her back to the precipice, she turned to face them, hair lashing her frost-bitten face, her clothes offering no protection from the elements and her daughter's remains pressed to her chest.

"Leave us alone!" she screamed. "You can't have her!"

"We want to help you, Jageena," said Panthro, holding out his hand to her. "No one is going to take your daughter away from you."

"I don't believe you! You're like all the others!" She gazed down at the fleshless face within the folds of the material. "They didn't believe she was special. They went away and left me."

"No, Jageena. They never left. You killed them. You killed them all."

"They were traitors!" she yelled. "They didn't believe in her. She will be great. My daughter will rule Thundera! The Ancient Spirits have promised me this!"

Abruptly, she lifted her face and appealed to the heavens. "You're still there, aren't you? I will not fail you again. My faith is in you always. As you saved me before, so it will be again."

She closed her eyes and took a step backwards. Panthro yelled out and raced to stop her but gravity had already claimed her. Cheetara managed to get to the edge in time to see Jageena become a diminishing speck against the endless white of the precipice until the ground halted her fall. Her faith had been misplaced. The Ancient Spirits may have saved her before on Thundera when she had fallen into a fiery pit, but here on this world of frozen wastes they had turned their backs on her. With her passing, the blizzard lost its fury and softly fell the silent snow, covering her with flakes cold enough to match the heart that had once borne such hatred. A fitting end, perhaps, but Cheetara felt no sense of triumph. If this was victory, then it was a hollow one indeed.

Panthro was less reticent about his feelings. "Damn it all!" he said, striking the snowy ground where Jageena had stood only moments before. "Happy now?"

"No, not at all. You know me better than that."

He struck the ground again and added another curse. "What now?" he said, his frustration spent. "I suppose we should go down there and give her a decent burial."

"No," said Cheetara. "I think we should get out of here. Look!"

She pointed to the other side of the precipice. The falling snow had cleared up enough to reveal that they were not alone. A group of about twenty of the native people of the ice moon stood watching them, weapons in hand. As intruders on their world and Thundercats, they were not likely to receive a warm reception.

"I think you're right," said Panthro. "Let's make it as quick as possible."

He held out his hand to help Cheetara to her feet. Before she could take it, a coating of frost suddenly formed over his arm. Barely had he time to express his surprise when he was encased in a thick crust of translucent ice. Cheetara turned in time to see that another group of natives had appeared from out of nowhere before an icy blast hit her and she saw no more.

*Jageena is no more, but will she continue to haunt the Thundercats from the grave?*

*Continued in **Chapter Seven: Exiles***