

All Good Things

The sequel to 'Breaking the Code'

By Spaced Angel

Chapter Seven: Exiles

There was nothing here to fear, yet still Lion-O dreaded every step that took him deeper in the bright heart of this place.

Strip lights set into the walls lit his way, creating an environment of almost perpetual daylight despite the reality of actually being several floors below the basement of Cat's Lair. This was the most secure area on Thundera and consequently the perfect location for the cell block. Everything else had been constructed on the advice of their Ursan allies, in particular the installation of energy fields to contain prisoners rather than barred doors. So very practical, they had said, for it allowed the guards to maintain a constant watch on the inmates. Lion-O knew that the prisoners found it less agreeable and certain of them had complained about being treated like criminals, which had an irony about it, considering the crimes that had got them imprisoned in the first place.

He could, however, understand their grievances. Walking past the cells now, each with their inmates sullenly glaring at the intrusion of questioning eyes, he again felt for their lack of privacy and the bare surroundings that stripped them of all but the basic necessities of life. When he had raised his concerns with the Ruling Council, he had been curtly reminded that such were their affairs, a prerogative he himself had granted them. It had been a minor devolution of his powers, but one that he already had cause to regret. Having given them an inch, they lived in hopes of gaining more and their constant demands were wearing him down. Besides, they had argued, these were criminals; what else did they expect? They had given up the right to luxuries when they had committed their crimes and the smooth running of the laws was evidence that such conditions acted as deterrent to others. The will of the majority meant that Lion-O found himself in no position to argue, but he often found himself wondering, why then, if that were true, were the cells always full.

Quickening his pace, he strode purposefully on down the corridor, trying his best not to engage with the enmity burning in the eyes of the confined. Once, he thought he caught a muttered insult. The quick action of his attendant guard in electrifying the energy field reduced its inmate to anguished silence.

"Was that really necessary?" he admonished the guard.

"He insulted you, my lord," said the guard, some surprise showing in his eyes that his actions had been questioned. "Our orders are to maintain an orderly and civil environment."

“Yes, I see,” Lion-O said, hoping his tone conveyed something of his unease. “Still, people have a right to their opinions.”

“Not here.” On firmer ground, the guard stood a little taller, his faith in his orders giving him confidence. “These scum chose to be here, my lord. So they must live by our rules.” He gestured down the corridor. “Not far to go now. Just a little further.”

Lion-O allowed himself to be led and followed in the guard’s footsteps, the feeling of reluctance at being anywhere near this place growing with every step he took. He had tried to stay away from the cell block as much as possible over the past few years and now he found himself paying his second visit here in as many days. He could only hope that this meeting would go better than the first.

A little ahead, the guard had stopped and was standing to attention beside a thin strip of wall that separated two cells. Lion-O forced himself to take a final few steps and came to a halt facing a shimmering blue energy field. Through its glow, he could clearly make out the prisoner within. The room was achingly bare, save for a wooden table that stood at its centre. Seated on this, her back to him, was the reason that had brought him here.

He nodded to the guard, who promptly deactivated the force wall. “You holler if you need me,” he advised as the blue barrier sprang back into place.

“That won’t be necessary,” said Lion-O.

The guard smirked. “As you say, my lord. Just you remember I’m only a call away.”

He stalked away, imperious in his command, leaving them to what little privacy the small cell offered. Lion-O waited at a respectful distance, expecting her to turn and face him. When she did not stir, he rounded the table and faced her. She sat cross-legged, her head resting on the one arm that she had propped up on her knee, eyes resolutely fixed on the stained wood of the table. There was a stillness about her that sat ill with his memories. It troubled him to the extent where he felt compelled to reach out and lift her face so that she had to meet his gaze. In better light, he saw the purple bruise around her left eye and the gash that ran along the top of her cheekbone.

“Cheetara,” he said, appalled by what he saw, “did the Plun-darrians do this to you?”

She pulled away from his touch and shook her head. “No, they treated us well enough, considering we were Thunderians in their territory.”

In the old days, such a trespass would have resulted in instantaneous death. But time and an uneasy peace treaty between Plun-darr and Thundera upheld by superior forces had forced the Mutants to change tactics. He had not been there when the call had come in that two Thundercats had been captured on Plun-darr’s ice moon, although Bengali had told him how the official he had spoken with had fairly gloated over this misdemeanour. Generously, the two transgressors had been returned unharmed to Thundera, along with the news of the death of Jageena and the secret base

with its grisly contents. Inevitably, there followed uproar. As reviled as she was by the jaguars, Jageena had still been one of their own. Now they wanted retribution.

“If a jaguar did this--”

“No, Lion-O.” She straightened her back with a slow, tentative movement that spoke of injuries other than the obvious. “Castor came to see me.”

“Your House Leader?” He stared at her. “He did this?”

She challenged him with a raised quizzical eyebrow. “You find that so surprising?”

If he was honest, then no. Castor had that air of malicious ambition about him that reminded Lion-O too much of his uncle. “I’m surprised he came here,” he said. “I thought you were...” He hesitated, not wanting to put it into words.

“An outcast?” Cheetara said. She sighed and heaved herself down from the table. “I am. Castor just came to remind me of that fact. He said that the other cheetahs wanted nothing to do with me.” The briefest hesitation seemed to rob her voice of some of its strength. “It seems I’m on my own.”

In more ways than one, Lion-O thought. What he had to say was not going to make her feel any better.

“Cheetara,” he began, finding other distractions in the empty cell for his eyes, “about what happened on the ice moon.”

“You want to know if I killed Jageena?”

He could feel her penetrating gaze fixed on him and he had to look up. “Did you?”

“What do you think?”

He shrugged and leant his weight up against the table. “I don’t know. That’s why I’m here. That’s why I’m asking you.” Her expression did not change so he tried a different tack. “The news from Plun-darr is that the people of the ice moon saw Panthro and you on the same ledge where Jageena had been moments before.”

“She jumped,” Cheetara said impassively. “No, that’s not quite true. She put her faith in something that was no longer there and she fell to her death.”

Lion-O released the breath he had been holding. “I’m glad you’ve told me that. I had my doubts.”

“Did you?”

The question was icy in tone and he felt the need to explain himself. “I’m not judging you, Cheetara. I’m just saying that, after what happened, if you had pushed her--”

“I didn’t.”

“It would have been understandable. Not right,” he added quickly, “but understandable.”

Her eyes narrowed a fraction. “Is that what you came here to say, that you ‘understand’?”

“Not entirely.” He pushed himself up and went over to where she stood. What he had to say, he felt had to be done with reassurance. He reached out and rested his hands on her shoulders. A questioning look came into her eyes, as if she already suspected that this heralded bad news. “Cheetara, the jaguars are pushing for charges to be brought against you.”

“I expected that.”

“If they are successful, I won’t be able to help you. I’m sorry, but no one can be above the law.”

“Especially not the friends of the Lord of Thundera?”

He smiled ruefully. “Especially not, I’m afraid.”

She turned her back on him. “I’m not asking for special favours, Lion-O. I didn’t kill Jageena.”

“With the evidence from Plun-darr, Cheetara, I fear the courts will take a different view.”

She spun round, eyes blazing. “I didn’t kill her! How many more times do I have to say it?”

“Then why did you go there?”

Her rage died a little in the face of his determination. “All right, I admit, I wanted her dead. I went to find her because I wanted revenge.”

“Thank you,” said Lion-O. “At least that was honest. What changed?”

Cheetara sighed. “She had. You’ve heard about her base?” Lion-O nodded. “Jageena was insane with grief. She had lost everything, her child, her power, her mind. She wasn’t the same person who had done those things to me in the past.” She swallowed heavily. “I think that was why I was led there, not for revenge, but to see Jageena for what she really was. I expected an ogre and found a pitiful wretch instead.” She shrugged. “Now you know. Now what?”

“Now,” he said slowly, “perhaps you can tell me what to do about Panthro.”

“What about him?” she said, her brow furrowing. “Is he all right?”

“He’s pleading guilty to Jageena’s murder.”

Cheetara stared at him, her mouth slightly agape. “Why?” she stammered. “He’s not responsible.”

“After what you’ve told me, clearly he isn’t. All he will say about it is that he was holding her hand and let her fall.”

“That’s not true. He was nowhere near her. He tried to save her.”

“Then why plead guilty?” Her eyes widened a fraction as understanding came to her. “He’s doing it for me, isn’t he?”

“I suspect so,” said Lion-O. “If this does go to trial, it will all come out. Innocents will suffer.” He chose not to name the child directly, in case the cell was bugged. There was nothing to be gained in compounding errors already made. “By pleading guilty, the charges are answered. Sentence will be passed without any questions ever being asked.”

Cheetara found the support of the table and leaned up against it. When she did finally find her voice and strength enough to look up, her face was ashen. “The jaguars will demand a life for a life, you know that. Lion-O, you can’t let Panthro be executed for something he didn’t do.”

“I know, Cheetara, but what can I do? My hands are tied as far as the courts are concerned.”

“Make an exception,” she said forcefully.

“I cannot.”

“Yes, you can,” she retorted. “You choose not to, Lion-O. You are the Lord of Thundera.”

“Yes, I am lord,” he said sharply, “but not a tyrant. No one told Panthro to do this. He knows what he’s doing and what the consequences are likely to be. I cannot change his mind.”

Cheetara fell silent, staring blankly at her folded arms. “This is because of what Jade said to him. He told me that she asked him how far he would go for a friend.”

“I remember that,” said Lion-O.

“Giving up his life is too far.” She looked up abruptly. “I understand that I may have access to legal advice.”

“Of course.”

“Then get me a book on Thunderian Law. I’ll be damned if I’m going to let Panthro sacrifice himself for me!”

The mantle of responsibility sat well on Bengali's shoulders, Tygra thought as he followed the younger tiger down the brightly-lit corridor, better perhaps than it had suited him. With the benefit of hindsight, he had to wonder if he had ever done anything right in his years as second-in-command. The only duty he seemed not to have failed in keeping was that of keeping his leader alive. Looking back, he had to admit that it was more down to luck than judgement.

If so, then the luck of those days had long since run out.

Not for the first time in their journey, fatigue and a nagging ache from his lower leg forced him to stop. The injury he had suffered during his last meeting with Cheetara had not been as bad as he had feared. Somehow his tendons had survived their ill-treatment and he was left with a sprain that required no more than heavy strapping and reliance on a crutch for support. Despite that, it still conspired to slow him down. A call to Bengali brought him dutifully back to his side, where he waited with growing impatience as Tygra caught his breath.

"I'll be ready in a minute," he said.

Bengali shuffled uneasily. "Yes, well, I don't like to hang about here. I wouldn't put it past the other tigers to arrange for you to have an accident while you're on Thundera. This would be the ideal place."

Tygra nodded. Returning had been a big gamble. Not so long ago, Tyce, Leader of the House of Tigers, had been emphatic about what would happen should Tygra ever set foot on Thundera again. They had already tried to make good on that promise, when the Ten who had accompanied Jageena to Third Earth had delivered their judgement with so many knives. He remembered the events of that day all too clearly. The only thing still shrouded in mystery was the identity of the person who had ordered the attack. His suspicions told him that the most likely candidate was Tyce. He guessed that now he was back on Thundera, he would find out soon enough.

Clearly, Bengali also had the same misgivings. "I still think coming was a mistake," he said.

Perhaps he was correct, but how could he stay away? The fate of the person he loved more than life itself hung in the balance. He had to be there for her. More than that, he had to know why she was doing this. Did she hate him so much that she would choose death over a life with him?

With effort, he pushed himself up and continued the tortuous journey down the corridor. Inquisitive looks from the inmates of the cells ranged along the walls followed his progress until finally they arrived at their goal. Cheetara had been pacing back and forth behind the force field that kept her captive and only came to a halt when she saw them. Her eyes lit with genuine pleasure to see Bengali, a light that turned to wariness when her gaze shifted to his cloaked companion.

"Someone to see you," Bengali said. "You don't have long, so make it quick. The regular guard comes back on duty in ten minutes."

He deactivated the energy wall and Tygra stepped inside. The field blinked back into existence and Bengali retreated to a respectful distance. For a long moment, Tygra stared at her, his pounding

heart providing the only sound in the cell above the insistent monotone hum of the force field. In the few weeks they had been apart, she seemed thinner and dark circles that spoke of lack of sleep hung around her eyes. Whatever plan she had in mind was clearly giving her as much trouble as it was him.

“Who are you?” she said, putting the safety of the table between them.

Suddenly realising that his hood concealed his identity a little too well, he drew it back. The tension in her shoulders lessened fractionally and her expression changed to one of alarm.

“What are you doing here?” she said.

“You need to ask me that?”

“Tygra, it isn’t safe.”

He rounded the table to where she stood, stopping within reach, but not touching her. “You think my safety matters to me when I hear that you are in grave danger. Cheetara, why are you doing this?”

Her eyes took on a dull look. “I have no choice.”

“They forced a confession from you?”

She snorted. “No, of course not.”

“Then why have you pleaded guilty to murdering Jageena?”

“To save Panthro’s life. To save both our lives, in fact.”

He shook his head. “I don’t understand. This is foolishness. It will get you executed.”

“No, it won’t,” she said confidently. From the table she retrieved a large volume and flicked through its pages until she found for what she was looking. Holding it out to him, she instructed him to read the passage she indicated.

““Where a conflicting plea of guilt has been entered, a unanimous verdict cannot be reached. In such cases, the maximum penalty cannot be given with certainty of culpability and a lesser sentence must be imposed on all involved parties’.” He looked up. “Cheetara, I don’t understand.”

“Panthro says he did it and that I played no part in Jageena’s death. I say that I am responsible and that he was not. Thus, we have a conflicting plea. No one dies here, Tygra.”

He had to admit that it made a crazy kind of logic. “And what is this lesser sentence? Imprisonment?”

She shook her head. "Worse."

"What's worse?"

"Imprisonment implies a presence that can be tolerated under certain conditions. I am an outcast, despised and reviled by my own people. Who will tolerate me, even in prison?"

"So what does that leave?"

Cheetara drew a deep breath and regarded him gravely. "Permanent exile from Thundera and all of her territories and those of her allies. That includes Third Earth and Ursa." A faint smile came to her lips. "I wonder what Plun-darr is like this time of year?"

"Don't even joke about something like that."

"I'll manage."

He glanced across at her, wondering how deep that conviction went. "You don't have to, Cheetara, you know that." He licked dry lips, dreading what her response would be to his next question. "My feelings haven't changed. Have yours?"

She bowed her head. "I don't hate you, Tygra. I just think you would be better off without me."

This time, he could not stop himself. He grabbed her by the arms and forced her to look at him. "How can you say that? I would do anything for you. Back on Ursa, you said that I had let you down. If so, I will make amends, Cheetara. I have to, because I cannot live without you."

He sealed his words with a kiss. The tension in her body evaporated and he found himself looking into her soulful eyes.

"I never stopped loving you, Tygra," she said. "The things I said wounded me as much as they did you. I had to stop you following me. I never expected to return, not to face the hurt I had caused you."

"I know. I guessed that much."

Her gaze wandered downwards. "How is the leg?"

"A nuisance, that's all."

"And...?"

She let the question drift, for her meaning about the child was clear without having to be said.

"Fine. Neither of us needs the stress of having you risking your life."

A knowing smile came to her lips. "I was never in any danger. Not from the judgement of the courts, anyway."

"Cheetara, the jaguars want the death penalty."

"I know. But rarely is it pronounced on pregnant females."

He stared at her. "You're...?"

She nodded. "Lightning can strike twice in the same place."

"How long have you known?"

"A couple of days before I left Ursa."

"And knowing this, you still went to challenge Jageena? Why, Cheetara?"

She sighed. "You might find this hard to believe, Tygra, but I didn't want to bring another child into this world for Jageena to hate and try to destroy. Bad enough what she did to us. It was time to end it, one way or another."

"Your life or hers."

"Something like that."

"And now?"

Her gaze and hand drifted to her stomach. "Now I want to live. I want what she denied me, the chance to be a mother." She glanced over at him. "Can you forgive the past?"

"Love never has to forgive."

She leant over and kissed him gently on the lips. "Then go, before you are found here."

"To leave you like this is more torment than I can bear."

"And to lose you would tear me apart. Go, find us a ship, so that we may go wherever the winds of the universe take us. Let us know freedom, Tygra, for the first time in our lives. No Code of Thundera, no Thundercats, no families to please – just us."

He took the hand she had laid on his cheek and kissed her fingers. "I'll return, I promise. I won't let you down."

"You never did, my love," she said softly.

The hum of the force wall came to an abrupt end and Bengali reappeared, saying that it was time to leave. Tygra pulled the hood back over his head and, stopping only to kiss Cheetara once more, left the cell. He glanced back to see her standing by the barrier that kept them apart and he felt his heart skip a beat. All his fears and doubts had faded in those few precious moments. Whatever her reassurances, he could not shake the certainty that he come so very close to losing her. Now she needed him. Few people, he told himself, were given second chances. If he ever had a chance to do anything right with what was left of his life, this was the time.

“Bengali, where can I get a fast ship?”

He seemed phased by the question. “At the space dock, I guess? But why?”

“Because I made a promise,” he said, “one that I intend to keep!”

If she had had a choice, Pumyra would have been anywhere but in the hangar at Cat’s Lair. Too many memories had attached themselves to the place, not all of them happy. The events of this day would add to their sour flavour, she knew, and keep her away more surely than any amount of armed guards.

They had tried to bar her way, but she had stood firm and used her prerogative as healer and Thundercat to gain entrance. The sight that met her eyes was not a happy one. To see her two friends manacled made all her ire rise to boiling point. It took all her self-control to stop herself yelling out the injustice of what was happening. She knew why Cheetara and Panthro had allowed themselves to be convicted as murderers. She knew why both had stuck to their pleas in the face of the other’s insistence on their own guilt. She knew that permanent exile for both of them was the best outcome that could be expected from the whole situation. She knew all this, and still none of it made sense. If this was what Thundera had become, then she was having doubts as to whether she wanted to remain part of it.

Others had already come to the same conclusion. WilyKat, in particular, had refused to leave Ursa and was threatening to go his own way. Conversations with his sister revealed that she was thinking along similar lines. WilyKit, however, being the more practical of the twins, had confided a secret desire to follow in Mandora’s footsteps. Pumyra was sure the teen had the determination to carry her ambition to fruition, although she suspected that a longing for greater horizons than Thundera’s limited opportunities fuelled the eagerness that came into her eyes whenever she spoke of distant places and undiscovered lands. If the rebirth of Thundera had been a cause for celebration for some, then for others it had been a disappointment. The world had contracted back to the safe limits set by the elders and the youth bridled at their loss of freedom. Those who would not or could not accept the return of the old mantle had already begun to talk of the possibility of a

permanent colony on Third Earth. Pumyra was willing to bet that it would not be too long before all their hopes became reality.

It would still come too late for those who had made it their home long before any Thunderian knew of its existence. She stood quietly, listening to the judgement being passed on her two friends, knowing that they could never come home. With these few words, they were stripped of everything, of home, friends and family, forever to wander in an unforgiving and fickle universe. All they had been and all they had done was to be erased from history. No mention would ever be made of them again. They were effectively dead. And if they ever dared to resurrect their lives and return, they could expect any law-abiding citizen to carry out an immediate sentence of execution.

And so it was over. The ship that waited was to take them to the nearest planet outside of Thundera's borders and leave them there. They could take nothing with them nor could they expect to be given anything as they began their new lives as exiles, if it could be called living. As much as she knew Cheetara had plans of her own, Pumyra feared for them both with all her heart. All it would take was for them to stumble onto another world with another Mumm-ra and their days would be numbered. It was an ignoble end for those who had done so much for Thundera and her leader.

Their work complete, the officials filed out, leaving the guards to bundle their prisoners into the ship and carry out the remainder of the sentence. Before they could, Pumyra saw Cheetara catch her eye and beckon to her. Only her request that she be here had made her attend. She had survived the hardest part of the ordeal and now no duty-bound guard would stand in her way.

He put up a good attempt until a punch to his nose knocked him flat on his back. "Just one minute," Pumyra roared. "Is that too much to ask?"

The guard shook his head and picked up himself and his wounded pride to retreat a respectful few steps.

"Thanks for coming," said Cheetara. "I appreciate that."

"I couldn't let you leave without saying goodbye," said Pumyra.

"This is for you," Cheetara said, pressing a crumpled note into her hands. "Read it after I'm gone."

"What is it?"

"The note explains everything. What you do with that information is up to you."

The guard coughed, indicating that their time was up.

"Well, this is goodbye."

"Not forever." Pumyra kissed her on both cheeks and gave her arm a reassuring squeeze. "Take care, my friend."

“I will.”

The smile she gave her lingered in her memory long after the ship had left. Pumyra watched it vanish into the clouds of an overcast Thunderian sky and finally turned her attention to the note Cheetara had given her. She read it and caught her breath. For a time, she stared out across the city, not daring to read the message again in case she was mistaken. As her courage returned, she glanced over it again and all her doubts were banished.

Clutching it tightly to her breast, she ran through the Lair, scattering all in her wake. She hardly noticed the steps that she took two at a time nor felt the weight of the heavy door to the training room. She flew in, much to the surprise of Bengali and the group of trainees who were gathered around him.

“I need to speak to you now!” she said breathlessly.

In the group, someone giggled. Bengali frowned.

“Pumyra,” he said with some consternation, “can it wait? I’m in the middle of something.”

She shook her head vehemently. “This is so important that if I don’t tell you now, I’ll explode.”

“Right,” he said uncertainly. “Group, carry on with the exercise. I’ll be back in a minute.”

He joined her outside the room, shutting the door on the curious looks of the trainees.

“Pumyra, what is it?” he asked irritably.

“I’ve got wonderful news!”

He took an uneven breath. “Can any news today be wonderful?”

She brandished the note. “Cheetara just gave me this.”

“You saw her before she left? You were there?”

“Yes. Why weren’t you?”

“I couldn’t face it. Were they all right?”

“As well as could be expected in the circumstances. But Bengali, this note, it’s from Cheetara!”

“Yes, you told me that. So?”

“Do you remember when we were captured by the Erepii? We were on that dead world and you were very weak from lack of food and water?”

He nodded. "How can I forget?"

"We left you to take that Mutant vessel because you were so ill and when we returned you were better? Remember?"

His eyes narrowed a fraction. "Vaguely. I was pretty much out of it a lot of the time."

"Do you know why you felt better?"

He sighed. "Pumyra, I don't really have time for this. I have the trainees and--"

"Cheetara saved you. She gave you some of her blood."

"She did? I don't remember that."

"But you do remember how that elixir the Erepii gave us healed us. Tygra had it in his blood and he used it to save Cheetara's life and then she used her blood to save you."

"Yes," Bengali said warily. "So?"

"Listen to this." Pumyra unfolded the note and began to read. "*'Now I find myself about to leave Thundera forever, I realise that I have so much to say and no time left to say it. Therefore, this letter must suffice in my absence. I don't believe I have ever thanked you for all that you have done for me. You brought Tygra and me together and saved our lives and that of our unborn son on that fateful day on Third Earth. Words alone can never express the depth of gratitude that I owe you. All I can leave you is a gift, something that I know you have wished for your whole life.'*

'I never told anyone what happened on that world where the Erepii left us to die. While you and the others went after Saturnus to take his ship, I was left to watch over Bengali. I saw him grow worse and I knew I could not let him die after all that we had been through. My own life had been restored by the elixir that Tygra carried in his blood and, in my ignorance, I saw it as a curse. Only when I had to watch a friend slowly die did I see it as a way to save someone you loved dearly.'

'I gave Bengali my blood and I saw him come back to life. I resolved to spare him the knowledge of what I had done and let him believe that his recovery was not the result of the unnatural life which the Erepii brought to our people. Since then, I have learned that their gift had other blessings, in the chance that Tygra and I had to become parents. Our compatibility has given us Cyan and the new life I carry within me. I do not have your scientific understanding, but I believe that the blood I shared with Bengali must make us also compatible. In this, I knew that I held the key to your future happiness.'

'So, before I set out to find Jageena, I had the Ursans remove several of my eggs and keep them in their care. With their help, Pumyra, you could have the child you have always wanted. You could carry this baby in your womb and give birth to it as if it were your own. The Ursans tell me that the sex of the child can be pre-determined, so that you may have a son, who will take after his

father, rather than me. This gift I give freely to you. I would lay no claim to his life. He would be your son and yours alone. It is your choice how you proceed. Your friend, Cheetara'."

Pumyra screwed up the note. "Well, Bengali, what do you think?"

He looked thunderstruck. For a moment she feared he would give a negative response, but slowly a smile started to spread across his face. Suddenly, he grabbed her and whirled her around.

"I think that's the most fantastic news I have ever heard," he said. "Do you want to do this?"

She reached up and kissed him. "You know I do."

"Then we will." He glanced upwards and winked. "Cheetara, wherever you are, thank you."

Sadness and joy in equal measure and great hopes for the future. But nothing lasts forever...

*Continued in **Chapter Eight: Gauntlet***