

All Good Things

The sequel to 'Breaking the Code'

By Spaced Angel

Chapter Eight: Gauntlet

The waiting was always the worst.

Even after all this time, Pumyra found her insides screwing up and her stomach turning cartwheels. It never got any easier. If anything, as one year slipped into another, her anxieties grew worse.

Glancing up at the clock, she tried to tell herself that it was too soon to start worrying. This was at best a loose arrangement and he could put in an appearance at any time over the five days that she was here on Third Earth. Usually, he made it by the third day. Now it was the fourth and she had convinced herself that something terrible had happened.

It was of course a possibility. Far from the relative safety of Thundera and Third Earth, the universe had no particular love for three exiled Thunderians. They were gone, but she had never forgotten them. Tygra had never been banned from visiting Third Earth, so it was here that they had conducted their clandestine meetings over the past fifteen years, where she shared news and gave him supplies that she had smuggled out of Thundera. He was infallibly cheerful, never complaining and making light of situations that would have made anyone else buckle under the strain.

Reading between the lines, Pumyra knew their life in exile to be hard. The burgeoning borders of Plun-darr had seven times forced them to move out of the Mutants' reach. Just recently it had been reported that this expansion was gaining speed. She knew where Tygra and Cheetara had made their home and that it sat a mere ten light years beyond Plun-darrian space. Every time a new report came in, she feared to hear that their adopted planet had fallen. So far, they had been lucky, but she had to wonder for how much longer.

She realised she had been too long in thought when the crack and tinkle of breaking glass brought her back to reality. A test tube lay in pieces, its scarlet contents spread far and wide and slowly dripping down the cabinet. The warming flame over which it had been suspended had done its job a little too well. With a sigh, she picked up a cloth and started to mop up the mess.

"Be with you in a minute," she said, hearing the soft swish of the opening door.

"Take your time," came a familiar voice.

She was up on her feet in a second. “Tygra, you’re here!”

Her joy at seeing him was tempered only by her shock at his appearance. Shadows showed in the hollows under his cheek bones and his eyes were sunken and red.

“Are you all right?” she asked. “You look terrible.”

He smiled at her harsh diagnosis. “I had something of a rough journey getting here. It’s nothing.”

That went some way to reassuring her. “Trouble?”

He released a long breath. “I had to take the long way round a radioactive star cluster. The radiation knocked out the sensor array and I was on visuals alone. It’s why I’m late. Sorry.”

“Forget it. I’m just glad that you’re here.” She went to him and gave him a peck on the cheek. “I was worried.”

“I know. Don’t be. Everything’s fine.”

“Cheetara?”

“Well.”

“Cyan and Chaya?”

Tygra gave a small snort of laughter. “Very well, both of them.”

Pumyra smiled, guessing what he meant. “Giving you hell?” He nodded. “I know that feeling.”

“Cyan’s going to be eighteen in a few weeks’ time. He’s already talking about leaving us for pastures new.” He leant his weight up against the examining table and folded his arms. “I had hoped he would opt for a more settled life.”

Pumyra laughed. “How likely is that, with parents like Cheetara and you?”

“Oh, I don’t know. We’ve become nicely domesticated. We’ve land enough to feed our family and a little extra for trade. Things could be worse.”

Just how much so, Pumyra longed to ask. Instead, she chose a less direct tack. “I listen out for you, on the daily reports. Plun-darr is pressing your borders pretty hard, I hear.”

“Yes,” Tygra said in heavy voice. “We’ll have to think about moving again soon.”

Pumyra inwardly groaned for them. “Another move? Where will you go this time?”

“It’s a problem. I’ve grown to love it there. Still,” he said, his tone becoming brighter, “I’m sure there are other planets in the universe who will take us.”

“I’m sure,” she agreed.

“Either that or we find a permanent solution.” His gaze wandered around the room. “Is it my imagination or is the infirmary bigger than it used to be?”

“It is. They knocked through into the next room.”

“Made a good job of it too,” he said approvingly.

“You don’t mind?”

“Of course not. Why should I?”

She gave a light shrug. “The Lair is your baby.”

He smiled. “Ah, but babies grow up. You should know that.”

“All too well, I’m afraid.”

“And times change. We never had much need for a big infirmary in the early days. The larger population you have here makes a difference though.”

“Much larger,” Pumyra agreed.

The number of Thunderians living on Third Earth had stopped being counted in single figures over twelve years ago. The young and intrepid had been lured away from Thundera by tales of plenty and adventure on this fertile planet many light years from their home world. Since the initial few had first built their dwellings in the shadow of Cat’s Lair, the settlement around had swelled to number nearly a thousand people. That many demanded facilities that the Lair was struggling to provide.

Increased space in the infirmary had been one major change. Another had been the transformation of the former bedrooms upstairs into offices for the people who saw to the running of this colony far from Thundera’s reach. After it was found that Third Earth was fast acquiring a reputation as a safe harbour for what was termed ‘undesirables’, the settlement was told to get itself in order or have some kind of government imposed upon it. Wanting to keep their independence, the settlers had chosen to reinstate a degree of law and order, much to everyone’s relief. Thundera still viewed the colony with suspicion and the feeling was mutual, which Pumyra had found worked in her favour. No one here paid much attention to the people she spent her time with, so news never got back to Thundera. Overall, it was a very satisfactory situation for all concerned.

“In time it will need a proper government,” Tygra was saying when she switched her attention back to him. “A settlement this size is soon going to be too unwieldy for a handful of well-meaning people to control.”

“I know Lion-O was thinking about giving us a degree of own rule,” she replied. “Our own governor, I think he said.”

“Us?” Tygra queried.

She felt the blood rush to her cheeks. “Us in the broadest possible sense. Besides,” she added, lowering her eyes, “I’ve always regarded Third Earth as my real home.”

“Me too,” he said softly. “I have never felt more at home than when I was here.”

The ache in his voice was hard to hear. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to rake up bad memories.”

“You didn’t. Third Earth has been on my mind a lot lately.” He smiled and banished the ghost of times past. “So tell me your news.”

There was much to tell. As usual, she had prepared a datachip with a round-up of all that had happened over the past year for Tygra to take with him, but nothing beat telling him in person. He was always pleased to hear that his friends were doing well and she had never detected any trace of resentment about his own situation compared to theirs. At times like these, a part of her longed for him to rage against the injustice of it all. But of course he never did. Instead, as usual he was glad for her.

“What about your other decision?” he asked when she came to the end of her news. “Have you rethought that?”

“No,” she said. “I know it was the right thing to do.”

Not that anyone else agreed with that. Handing in her insignia and stepping down from an active Thundercat role had been a great wrench. Bengali had tried to talk her out of it and Lion-O had not been pleased at all, but she had held fast to her decision and had refused to be swayed. To her mind, it made sense. In recent years, Lunatac pirates had been taking their chances against Thundera’s defences. The trouble was that quite a few of them were slipping through the net. The old pattern of attack and retaliation was falling back into place. Plun-darr refused any knowledge of their activities, claiming they were rogue operatives and, until any evidence proved otherwise, a diplomatic peaceful solution to Thundera’s problems would not be happening any time soon.

This realisation had meant that Lion-O was compelled to spread the Thundercats at his command around the planet to protect the most vulnerable areas. For the young, single members, this was a chance to see more of their home world. But for Pumyra, it meant major change. She was less inclined now to go gallivanting around the countryside as she might have done when she was younger. She was settled in the city and had the welfare of her family to consider. Then there

were her other responsibilities at the clinic. Dropping everything and running off at Lion-O's command was not a feasible prospect any more. So she had stepped down and had regretted it ever since.

"At least I thought I knew it was right," she said. "Did I do wrong? Bengali says I did. We've had some pretty big arguments about it."

"Why?"

Pumyra sighed. That was just the sort of question Tygra would ask. Instead of just accepting the situation, he wanted to know more. As usual, he was right. There was more.

"He thinks I should put being a Thundercat first and a healer second."

Tygra's eyebrows rose a fraction. "He resents what you do? Of all people, I would have expected him to support you."

"He does. He just doesn't see why I can't do both." She shrugged. "I had to make a decision. As a healer, I'm still helping people, just in a different way."

"From what I hear, very well you do too."

Pumyra smiled. After all this time, she was still proud of her achievements. As chief consultant at the Institute of Fertility, she felt she was giving something lasting back to Thundera. Many couples experienced difficulties in conceiving and, as Cheetara and the Ursans had helped her, so she was able to help others by using their medical expertise. What had been first viewed with suspicion was now generally accepted and couples in need found no shortage of willing donors. The birth of the five hundredth baby conceived with the Institute's help had been the cause of celebration, marking as it did an important milestone on the way to complete recognition. She counted her work as important as anything she had ever done as a Thundercat, yet guilt plagued her about letting Lion-O down. It was the major source of friction in her marriage and one that Bengali showed no sign of every trying to understand.

"At the end of the day, Pumyra, it's what you think, not anyone else," Tygra went on. "I understand why you did it. I can't see what else you could have done in your position. The people of Thundera need you more as a healer than they do as a Thundercat." He smiled. "Leave that to the youngsters."

As he finished speaking, one of the youngsters he had in mind looked in. A white tiger one month short of his fourteenth birthday, he was the image of his father with a temperament to match. The initial cockiness that accompanied his entrance vanished the moment he saw his mother was not alone.

"Oh, sorry," he mumbled. "Didn't mean to disturb you."

Pumyra gestured to him to enter. "You know your uncle Tygra. Come in, Benjy, and say hello."

He stepped over the threshold, wiping a grimy palm down his leg. "Pleased to meet you, sir," he said, offering his hand.

"As I am you," Tygra said. "You've grown."

He had indeed, Pumyra thought, comparing him against Tygra's height. Benjy seemed to have shot up in the last year, to the point where she was in danger of being dwarfed. The pace of his growth was outstripping his body's ability to keep up, so that he had the appearance of being lanky and had a tendency towards awkwardness. He would grow out of it, she was sure. At his age, he had plenty of time to catch up.

"Uh, mum, I'm going over to Caspian's house. That all right with you?"

That he bothered to tell her was something of an improvement. The last few months had seen him change ever more from the gurgling cub she had once held in her hands into a surly teenager, who grunted rather than talked and fell out with his father with tedious regularity. She suspected there was more to this voluntary offering of information than a desire to be helpful.

"Yes. You'll be back for dinner?"

Benjy squirmed uncomfortably and his eyes found a convenient distraction on the floor. "I was kinda hoping to stay overnight."

Pumyra sighed. Caspian came from a good family and could charm the leaves from the trees. He delighted in causing trouble and letting others take the blame. With friends like that, Pumyra knew it would not be long before Benjy was led down a similar road.

With that thought nagging at the forefront of her mind, she refused his request. "Be back in time for dinner or else you're grounded for the remainder of our stay on Third Earth."

The huffing and puffing that followed was milder than she had expected, probably due to Tygra's presence. After the minimum of protests, he relented and promised to return when she said. He might have agreed, but she knew there would be hell to pay for this later.

"Teens," she said to Tygra after he had gone. "Were we ever that difficult?"

Tygra nodded. "Our parents probably said the same thing about us. He's a fine boy, Pumyra."

"Yes, he is. I worry about him though, falling in with the wrong crowd."

"The more you try to stop him, the more he'll want to do it."

She sighed. "I realise that. I hope he does too before he gets into trouble."

"He's sensible. I'm sure it won't come to that."

“If it does, he’ll never be accepted into training as a Thundercat.”

Tygra’s eyebrows lifted a fraction. “He wants to be...?”

“Yes. Our fault. We’ve filled his head with notions of grandeur. He thinks it’s the best thing in the world.”

“Cyan says the same thing. He wants to come to Thundera and enrol at Cat’s Lair.”

“Is that wise?” said Pumyra. “Does he know about what happened to you and Cheetara?”

“Not the details,” Tygra admitted. “He knows we can’t ever go home. He knows that if anyone asks, he is to say that we adopted him when he was an infant. That should carry him safely through training.”

It saddened her beyond belief to hear him say things like that. Things had changed so much in the fifteen years that they had been away and yet so much remained the same. If the other tigers knew that Tygra was Cyan’s natural father, she could guess what their reaction would be.

“He’s welcome to stay with us,” Pumyra offered. “It’s no problem.”

Tygra nodded his thanks. “We’ll see. I’ve still got time to change his mind. Trouble is he’s got his sister on his side. She thinks she can follow in her big brother’s footsteps.”

Pumyra smiled, imagining how Chaya was digging her heels in. She had charted her progress through photos and stories enough to know that she was firmly taking after her mother, in looks and attitude. Her thoughts turned to times when she remembered Cheetara being that determined and her amusement turned to sadness as she realised how dearly she missed those times.

The hand that came to rest on her shoulder told her how clearly her emotions were showing on her face. “No regrets,” Tygra said. “Our time is too precious to waste dwelling on the past.”

Pumyra sniffed back the tears that had threatened to fall. “You’ll be able to stay a while?”

“I don’t see why not.”

“I have a couple of days left before my time is up. You’ll join us for dinner tonight?”

Tygra nodded. “I’d be delighted.”

“I’ve managed to get more in the way of supplies for you this time, as well as a few luxury items.”

It had been a good lie, about hard times befalling the people of Third Earth. The formal request had come back with Lion-O’s approval and no questions asked.

“Thank you.”

Pumyra shook her head. “Don’t thank me, Tygra. It’s the least we can do. I should be able to get more next time.”

“Let’s hope by then we won’t need them,” Tygra said, his expression becoming sombre.
“Actually, while I’m here, I wondered if I could ask you for something.”

She waited while he fished about in his bag. Finally, he produced a small bottle with a name scrawled on its side. Pumyra glanced at it and frowned.

“These are maximum strength painkillers,” she said. “Tygra, who are these for?”

He held her gaze a moment before replying. “A neighbour. I said I would ask if you had them or something similar.”

“Well, yes, I do, but to be taking something this strong indicates a serious injury or illness. Why isn’t this person under medical care?”

As primitive and remote as she knew their home to be, somehow this mystery person had got access to powerful drugs. Why then were they now asking Tygra to provide them with more? A frightening possibility sent a cold shiver down her spine.

“They’re not for Cheetara, are they? If she’s ill--”

“No, they aren’t,” Tygra said. “Nor for Cyan or Chaya. This neighbour was being treated by a healer. He was told he was a terminal case, with two months left if he’s lucky. There’s nothing more they can do for him, but stave off the pain. Normally, I wouldn’t ask, but with the Mutants pressing our borders, supply ships are reluctant to land.” His case made, his tone became less agitated. “He needs those painkillers, Pumyra. If you don’t have anything, then he’ll have to manage on what he’s got.”

She heard him as if from behind a door. His words seemed distant, their meaning almost incomprehensible. She mumbled her reply that of course she would help and, having handed over the pills, watched him stow the bottle back in his bag. Task complete, he looked up and faced her scrutiny.

“They’re for you, aren’t they?”

It was a statement rather than a question. She knew what he would say. He had been too insistent in his request, as though his very existence depended on her giving him the medication. As she had expected, he did not deny it and she felt tears well up in her eyes.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” she said, her voice starting to break. “Why didn’t you come to me? You know I would have helped. Why?”

Now, too late, he came to her, wrapping his arms around her and giving her the support of his shoulder for her tears. "There's nothing you could have done. It's all right, Pumyra."

She pushed him away. "How can it be all right? You've just told me you've got months to live. It's impossible. You can't die."

He smiled ruefully. "Everyone dies."

She nodded, acknowledging that her remark made little sense. All these years, when they had faced danger together, when they had danced near the edge of calamity, it had seemed as though they were invincible, far from death's reach. If she had ever given the matter any thought at all, she had supposed that it come swiftly, at Mumm-ra's hand or through a Lunatac plan that finally was a success.

Yet here they were, facing neither of these. Where had all that time gone, she wondered. It only seemed like yesterday when she had had her own initiation into the Thundercats, here in this Lair.

"What will you do?" she asked.

He sighed. "That depends. Have you heard from Panthro?"

She shook her head.

"He missed Chaya's birthday," Tygra said. "He's never missed, not once."

"Perhaps he was held up somewhere. Do you know his last location?"

"He said something about a planet seeking help in repelling Mutant attempts to overwhelm their borders." He gave a soft snort. "You know Panthro, always a sucker for a good cause. All the same, he would never have missed Chaya's birthday without good reason."

Pumyra held his gaze and read in his eyes the unspoken concern. "You think he's...?" She could not bring herself to say it. "Gone?"

Tygra stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Cheetara says so. She said that she woke up one morning and there was an emptiness she had never known before. I tend to take her word in such matters."

"Oh, Panthro," Pumyra said, steadying herself up against the bed for support. Too much bad news was making her head spin. "What have you done?" she whispered to the quiet world.

"If that is the case," Tygra went on, "I have to consider my family when I'm gone. I have to make my peace. Would Bengali deliver a message to Tyce for me?"

Pumyra looked at the datachip he held out to her. "What is it?"

“A request. Tyce will understand.”

He might, but Pumyra did not. The Leader of the House of Tigers had never made any attempt to conceal his dislike of Tygra and any of his former associates. This message, whatever it was, was likely to fall on deaf ears.

“Tygra, he hates you. He wants you dead. He was probably responsible for that attack on you here on Third Earth. You can’t do this.”

“I can ask,” he said simply. “If he chooses not to reply, then I must accept that. Either way, I will have my answer.” His hand moved towards her, emphatically impelling her to take the datachip from him. “Please, Pumyra, for me and for Cheetara.”

Every instinct rebelled against what he was asking. But how could she refuse? Reluctantly, she reached out and took it.

“I’ll ask Bengali and I know he’ll do it,” she said, “but he won’t like it.”

Tygra smiled. “As long as he does it. Now, about that dinner...”

The façade of the house rose up out of the darkness, lights shining from its windows like the eyes of monster. All that had changed from the first time that Bengali had been here was the time of day. In daylight it appeared only imposing; night had added a new terror to its perception that made it feel like the entrance to the very pit of all evil.

The other thing that had changed was that now he was not alone. Tygra strode at his side with the determination of someone fixed in purpose. That he was here on Thundera was nothing sort of a miracle. That he was here at all Bengali knew was his fault.

He had not wanted to go. Pumyra had returned from Third Earth full of news and a request from Tygra for him to deliver a message to Leader Tyce of the noble House of Tigers. A simple enough mission, but one about which he had prevaricated for days. Even if he had not picked up on Pumyra’s unease when she had explained what Tygra wanted him to do, a gut feeling told him straight away that this was likely to be the lull before the storm.

He had imagined how Tyce was going to react. A great bull of a tiger, he came from the old school that revelled in never forgiving or forgetting the tiniest of slights. He could hate with a vengeance and loved the power it gave him over those eager to win his approval. For himself, Bengali had never tried to curry favour nor had felt any desperate need to do so. He knew Tyce disapproved of his position as second-in-command on account of both his commoner status and

the fact that he was not one of his beloved red tigers. Overall, he was not expecting a warm reception for either himself or his message.

Strangely though, he had found that getting in was the easy part. The lackey who had opened the door had seemed uninterested in him or his mission and delivered him into the presence of his master without comment. Tyce's inner sanctum was marked by two burly tigers who stood a foot taller than Bengali and had regarded him as if he had been little more than an unsightly stain on the carpet. They had made no move to stop him, however, and he had been quickly ushered past them into the room where Tyce held court.

A few steps in told Bengali that this was likely to be a different type of meeting than any he had had before. The light level was low and the haze that had hung in the air smelt of spices. The furniture was antique Thunderian and thus impossibly expensive, owing to the paucity of items that had survived the flight and subsequent off world existence in the years after Thundera's destruction. Tyce himself had been seated behind a large, dark wood desk, languidly reposing in a deep chair and regarding his visitor with muted interest. As the silence continued and his embarrassment under Tyce's scrutiny heightened, Bengali had felt the growing need to say something and so had started with the obvious.

"Thank you for seeing me, Leader Tyce."

Tyce had sniffed and sat up, resting his elbows on the desk top. "Let's say I was interested. It isn't often I get a Thundercat at my door."

Bengali had noted the deliberate omission of his title, but said nothing. If Tyce was trying to bait him, he was determined not to give him the satisfaction of seeing how it affected him.

"I came at the behest of a friend to deliver a message to you."

Tyce's expression had not changed. "This friend, who is it?"

Having come this far, it seemed a shame to spoil it all now. "The message explains it all."

He had placed the datachip on the desk and slid it across to Tyce. The cold eyes continued to hold his for a long moment, before dropping to consider this new offering.

"Normally I would call my guards and have you thrown in the gutter where you belong for such presumption. However," Tyce had said, the ghost of a smile tugging at the corners of his lips, "in your case, I'm prepared to make an exception."

The temptation had been almost irresistible to tell Tyce what to do with his presumption and it took a good deal of self-control for Bengali to stifle this urge. Instead, he had waited, silently fuming, while Tyce inserted the datachip into his reader and scrolled down the contents. For a long time, he had said nothing, leaving Bengali to guess what he was thinking by charting the progress of his eyebrows up and down his forehead. When finally he did look up, his expression had returned to its usual impenetrable mask.

“You know what’s in this?” he had said, gesturing to the screen.

Bengali shook his head.

Tyce had allowed a slight smile to touch his mouth. “You’re just his messenger boy then.”

A remark like that was calculated to test his limits. Swallowing his pride, Bengali had struggled to keep the words he wanted to say in his thoughts and turned his attention to the completion of his mission. “I was told to wait for a reply. Do you have one?”

Tyce had chuckled at that. “So, you are in contact with the traitor. I had wondered. Whatever would your lord and master say if he knew? Then again, probably nothing. The Lord of Thundera favours his friends above all.”

“Then perhaps you should consider trying to number yourself amongst them.”

The amusement had faded from Tyce’s eyes like sunlight before rain. “Very well. A reply you want, then one you shall get.” He turned back to the screen, entered several commands and then ejected the datachip. Tossing it across the desk to Bengali, he had then sat back in his chair and sighed. “There’s your answer, Thundercat,” he had said. “And mine. Now get out!”

He had needed no further invitation. He had scuttled with unseemly haste out of Tyce’s house and had delivered his message on the coded frequency Tygra had specified. If he had hoped that would be an end to the business, events had proved him sorely wrong. An hour ago, he had had a message on the secure Thundercat channel telling him to clear the way for a ship arriving shortly on Thundera without the proper papers. Whoever he had expected, he had been amazed when the sole occupant of the ship turned out to be Tygra, even more so when he had then insisted on being taken to see Tyce.

Since then, Bengali had given up trying to talk him out of this crazy mission. All he could get out of him was that a certain matter had to be settled and he was here on Thundera at Tyce’s invitation. Neither of those statements had any particular ring of conviction about them and as they drew ever nearer their final destination, Bengali knew he was losing the argument.

With one final supreme effort, he increased his speed and stopped in front of Tygra, forcing him to halt and acknowledge what he had to say.

“Bengali, I don’t have time for this,” he protested.

“Yes, you do. I don’t know what you’ve got planned, Tygra, but all I know is that Tyce hates you. Whatever he said in that message, you can’t trust him.”

Tygra looked away. “I have to believe that he will keep his word.”

“Well, I don’t. Will you at least tell me what’s going on?”

For a moment, Bengali thought he was about to open up and let him into the reason behind this secret meeting. Then the barriers came up again and he was looking into apologetic eyes.

“Bengali, I’m sorry. I have to do this. You don’t have to come with me.”

“You’re right, I don’t. But you are my friend. I’ll not let you go in there alone.”

“And for that, I thank you.” He glanced over as a slit of light appeared on one side of the now half-opened door of Tyce’s residence. “They’re expecting us. Come, let’s get this over with.”

He walked on, leaving Bengali staring after him, misgivings creeping like a cold vice around his throat and choking the words he wanted to say. Too late now, he knew. Nothing he could say would swerve Tygra from his purpose. He wished he had his confidence, as misguided as it seemed. With a sigh, he turned his reluctant feet in the direction of the house and followed Tygra’s lead.

Inside, he found that Tygra had been correct about their expected arrival. Tyce had emerged from his study and was waiting for them in the entrance hall, his hands clasped behind his back. His two personal bodyguards stood either side of the door and slammed it shut once Bengali had made it over the threshold. Only then did Tyce rouse himself from his smug stupor that had fixed a thin smile to his lips. The mask slipped, but even then, the smile remained at the corners of his mouth, lightly mocking in its persistence.

“So, you came,” he said, turning the obvious into what sounded like a criticism.

“Did you doubt I would?” Tygra replied. “We had an agreement.”

The smile deepened. “Indeed we did.”

“Do you have the document?”

With a lazy gesture, Tyce brought his hand from behind his back and passed a rolled sheet to him. Tygra took it, uncurled it and read it quickly.

“It seems in order,” he said. “Except you haven’t signed it.”

“Because *you* haven’t fulfilled your side of our agreement yet. If you succeed, then I’ll sign it. This *person* here,” Tyce said, nodding dismissively to Bengali, “is witness to that promise.”

“Very well.” Tygra handed the scroll back to him. “Shall we proceed?”

“Eager, aren’t you? In that case, follow me.”

Tyce turned sharply and led the way into the heart of his residence. The further from the outside world he took them, the deeper grew Bengali’s certainty that Tyce had something terrible waiting for them. He knew now why he had kept away from this place for such a long time. For

somewhere that was supposed to be a safe haven for all tigers, this place oozed hostility. He saw in it the eyes of people they passed in the corridor, in the scowls of servants who emerged from rooms to stare at the visitors and in the closeness with which they were supervised by the two bodyguards who had fallen in step uncomfortably close behind. In his time, he been to many places and faced many enemies, but none had ever made him feel more certain that his own demise was very near at hand than where he was right now.

Tyge paused in his stride only briefly to open a door that let a waft of cold air into the warm interior. He stepped through the opening without waiting to see if either of them would continue to follow and, given a chance out of his earshot, Bengali grabbed Tyge's arm.

"Whatever you're planning, it's not too late to turn back, you know."

Tyge hesitated momentarily, before patting Bengali's hand and freeing himself from the restraint. He still said nothing as he made his way through the doorway and out into a coldness that felt like the outside world. Bengali hurried after him to find himself in a courtyard, surrounded on all four sides by the wings of the house and lit by flaming sconces that Tyge's servants had set ablaze. In the centre was a fountain, stilled now in anticipation of the winter. A single droplet of water fell with regular monotony from the centre spout, cutting a path through the green mould that had made the fountain its home. Tyge stood a few feet away, talking to an older tiger with a long beard and clad in a brown robe, trimmed with strips of white fur at its colour and hems. In his hand he held a staff with a clear jewel embedded in its uppermost end that seemed lit internally by the reflected colours of the firelight.

"Who's he?" Bengali whispered to Tyge.

Before he had a chance to answer, this individual looked over to where they stood and his eyes narrowed. "So, the fratricide returns," he said.

Tyge gave a slight bow. "No fratricide, but one who has been unjustly accused, elder."

"We shall see." His eye moved to Bengali. "Ah, the Thundercat. You are his sponsor?"

"No," said Bengali. "I am his friend. Who are you?"

The old tiger smiled. "My name is unimportant, youngling, but if titles you need, then you may call me the Seeker of Truth. I speak for those who are unable to speak for themselves. I speak for the dead, the wronged, the murdered."

"Tyge murdered no one!"

The Seeker laughed. "Feisty, isn't he? Tell me, boy, were you there?"

"No, but--"

“Then your words are useless. A good man died, one of our greatest sons. You, Tygra, his brother, stand accused of killing him. You have answered the charge over the death of our previous Leader, Lord Mardak, by accusing that same brother of his murder. As Tyree now cannot speak for himself, you are left to prove your guilt or innocence in this matter. State your position.”

“I did not kill my brother,” Tygra said in a strong, clear voice. “Tyree was killed by the alien force called the Erepii or Scourge, which came to Thundera with the intent to enslave our people and use them as their feeding crop. They used my brother as their spokesperson and controlled his thoughts and actions. Through him, they killed Leader Mardak and tried to have me blamed for his death. Only when the Erepii were destroyed was he freed from their influence. They destroyed him. He died in my arms.”

The Seeker held his gaze for a long moment before nodding and turning away. “Such is your defence. Only the ancestors know the truth. They now must decide.”

“Have they not done that already? The fact that I survived the assassins sent to kill me shows that I stand in their favour.”

Tyce turned sharply to look at him. “You think we played any part in that?”

“Didn’t you?”

“I did not order it.”

“But you did not try to stop it.”

A brief smile touched Tyce’s lips. “You assume that I knew such a plot was intended.”

“If you had?”

“Then your assumption would have been correct.”

“And you accuse Tygra of murder,” Bengali said. “You two-faced--”

“As I said, I did not know,” said Tyce carefully. “But if I had, I would have approved. A life, after all, calls for a life and Mardak was kin.”

While he spoke, the Seeker had taken his staff and drawn a line in the sandy soil. Bengali watched as he measured out fifteen footsteps before drawing another line. Then, standing behind this division, he banged the floor with the staff three times. A door in the opposite wall opened and ten figures filed out, each bearing a heavy club. They lined up, five to either side of the Seeker between the lines in the sand, and stood looking expectantly in Tyce’s direction.

“I’m sure you know the procedure,” said Tyce. “As it has been laid down by generations passed, all you have to do to prove your innocence is to make it from here to where the Seeker stands. These warriors will try to stop you. Are you ready to face the Gauntlet?”

Like cold water poured over his head, Bengali felt a sudden chill take his body. “Tygra, you can’t be serious. This... this is madness!” He placed himself between him and waiting line of warriors. “I won’t let you do this. There has to be another way.”

Tyce laughed at his efforts. “How noble. And they say the lower orders have nothing to recommend them.”

“More than you have,” Bengali said. “This is sick!”

Tygra grabbed him by the arms and pulled him to one side. “Ben, listen to me.”

“No, you’re wrong,” he said, trying to shrug him away. “They’ll kill you, Tygra.”

“Probably.”

“Then walk away now, while you have the chance.”

“I can’t.”

Bengali was sure he caught a sparkle to his eyes that had not been there a moment before.

“I have to do this, for Cheetara, for Cyan and for Chaya. The deal I’ve made with Tyce will allow them to live on Third Earth. Panthro’s gone and I’m dying, Ben. I can’t leave without knowing that they will have some measure of protection. Can you understand that?”

He could, but it made Tygra’s decision no easier to accept. “You’re dying? Pumyra didn’t tell me.”

“I told her not to.”

“Then you should be with your family, Tygra. Don’t make me be the one to have to tell Cheetara why you aren’t ever coming home.”

The grip on his arms tightened. “If there was another way, don’t you think I’d take it? There’s no guarantees. If I fail...” He swallowed heavily, as if not wanting to countenance that thought. “Look after them for me, Ben, whatever happens.”

“I swear it, Tygra, always.”

He nodded his thanks and released his arms. “You don’t have to stay. Tyce will keep his word.” He managed a weak smile. “You’ve been a good friend, Bengali.”

“Not good enough, it seems.” He fought down the swell of grief that was choking his throat. “May... Jaga protect you.”

“He will. He knows I am innocent.”

He took a step back and the distance between them began to grow. Unwilling to let him go, Bengali hurried after him and, close again, hugged him tightly. No words could express how he felt and there was no time left to show him how this parting would affect him in any other way. He made no attempt to stop the tears that came to his eyes. At the end, what did it matter? He was losing a friend and it cut him to the bone.

When finally he let him go, Tygra gave him one last pat on the upper arm and walked back to Tyce. “I am ready,” he said. “I must prove my innocence or die trying.”

“Remove your outer garments,” the Seeker ordered. “The truth must appear naked before the judgement of the ancestors.”

He obeyed, dropping his clothing to the floor until he stood bare-chested to the cold night air. Satisfied, the Seeker rapped his staff upon the floor. “Should any part of you cross this line where I stand, then the ancestors will be deemed to have decided in your favour. Let the judgement of the Gauntlet begin.”

If a moment could have lasted forever, Bengali would have given anything for those seconds to be frozen in time for all eternity. He watched the rise and fall of his friend’s shoulders as he prepared himself for the ordeal and prayed that he would change his mind, even at this late stage. He was about to witness the death of a friend and he could not bear it. Compassion overrode reason and he found himself stepping forward at the same moment that Tygra did, across the line. Several steps more, still nothing happened. Then another step and the first blow fell. The warriors moved in, their weapons rising and falling, grunting with the effort they put into their attack.

And then Bengali was rushing forward, yelling at them to stop. Hands grabbed his arms and pulled him back with such force that he was thrown onto the floor. Tyce’s two bodyguards grinned down at his feeble efforts and defied him to rise again. He did so and paid for it with a stinging blow to the back of his head that left him on his hands and knees, surrounded by stars. From somewhere deep inside, he could hear a faint voice, screaming at him to get up, and he obeyed, only to find himself smashed back to the floor. Sand and the metallic taste of blood filled his mouth and he coughed up the nauseating mix.

As he did so, he felt three thuds through the floor. Looking up, he saw the warriors fall back into line, their clubs limp in their hands. At the far side, by the feet of the old tiger called the Seeker, was a still body, its seeping blood colouring the sand around it to red.

“The ancestors have decided,” the Seeker announced. “Let it be known that by their divine judgement, the innocence of Tygra has been proved.”

He rapped his staff on the floor again and the warriors retreated. Their bloody work done, they followed the Seeker through the side door and out of the courtyard. Bengali forced himself up, only to see a scroll of coiled paper flutter past his eyes.

He glanced up to see Tyce looking down at him with palpable contempt. “Your friend has been vindicated and I have kept my word. I have seen to it that his whore may live on Third Earth.” His gaze turned to the bloodied figure. “I hope she was worth it. Now get him and yourself out of my home.”

Tyce strode quickly by, over to door through which they had entered. Bengali stared after him, suddenly knowing the anger that drove the desire to kill.

“You’ll pay for what you did to him,” Bengali called after him. “I swear that!”

Tyce paused and smiled. “You can try, my fine Thundercat. But you would do better to learn from your friend and remember what happens to those who think they can cross me and get away with it.”

He pushed through the door and was gone. The courtyard was empty now, save for himself and a friend he had failed to save from himself. He crawled over to him, following the line of blood that marked the painful route of his passage through the Gauntlet. The ground was scuffed, but a little of the line remained. The Seeker had been true to his word. A single fingertip had crossed the line and it had been enough to call an end to the ordeal.

With a shaking hand, he sought a pulse in Tygra’s neck and found that a faint beat of life persisted. Almost fearful of moving him, he reached out and touched his shoulder, feeling the grind of broken bone against broken bone. How he had managed to get this far under such a beating only the ancestors knew. Perhaps they had given him the strength to success. No, Bengali decided, it was the love for the family he was leaving behind that had brought him this far. With his promise kept, his fight was over.

He rolled him onto his back and peeled back his half-closed eyelids, seeking for any sign that his soul had not given up the struggle to remain within his body. He called to him and saw no flicker of life within his dulling eyes. On his temple, the blood that had been oozing from the deep gash that had almost torn away part of his scalp congealed and flowed no more. Frantically, Bengali sought that faint pulse and found it gone.

“No!” he cried. “Don’t you die on me!”

He had seen Pumyra resuscitate patients a hundred times. It seemed so simple – breathe, pump, breathe. Breathe, pump, breathe. He tried time and time again, but nothing happened. When he finally did admit defeat, it was to take Tygra’s lifeless body in his arms and hold him as his tears fell onto his friend’s face and mingled with his blood to fall as red droplets to the sandy floor.

The sky was tinged with the rays of the rising sun when Cheetara awoke. She sat up, not knowing what had startled her from sleep and drenched her body in a cold sweat. It felt like a call, not spoken with a voice, but from the heart. She turned to the empty bed beside her, running her hand across the cold sheets. He had told her he had gone to collect supplies and had promised he would return. Now, as then, she was sure he had been lying. His condition had been getting a little worse of late and the painkillers Pumyra had given him no longer kept his symptoms at bay. Now coupled with the voice in her dreams, the conviction that something terrible had happened grew and drove her from her bed.

At the window, she stared out at the rising sun of this alien world, where the rivers run red with the iron ores that made this planet rich in minerals if not wealth. The sky was red too, deeper in hue than she remembered, more like the colour of split blood upon a sandy floor. She gasped at the vision that filled her mind and turned from the window, only to find that she was no longer alone.

He was there, cast in a blue light that emanated from him like the glow of life itself.

“Tygra,” she whispered to the apparition. “Have you left me?”

He approached and she did not move as he raised his hand to her cheek. There was no sensation in his touch, only a chill that made her shiver.

“What I would give to hold you again,” he said softly. “Cheetara, I’m sorry.”

“What happened?”

He closed his eyes briefly before meeting her gaze again. “You’ll be safe now. You can go home. Bengali will be here in a few days to take you and the children to Third Earth.”

She shook her head. “I don’t want to go to Third Earth. I want to be here with you.” She took a step away from him. “Tygra, what have you done?”

He turned his head as if listening to something over his left shoulder. “Cheetara, I cannot stay. This time is all I have to tell you that I’m leaving. You won’t be able to see me, but I’ll be there.” He drew closer again and tried to wipe away the tear that had appeared on her cheek. “There’s no pain anymore. Please don’t cry for me.”

“How can I not, knowing that I’ll never see you again?”

“I did what had to be done. My only regret is being parted from you. These years together have been the happiest of my life. Remember that and do not grieve.”

The pain was too much and her knees buckled beneath her. “Why must you go? Don’t leave me.”

He knelt, letting her see the agony of their parting reflected in his watery eyes. “I have not Jaga’s gifts. I will not be able to appear to you as he did to Lion-O. In time, we will be reunited.”

She reached for him. “Then let it be now. I can’t live without you, Tygra.”

“But you must.” He got to his feet and retreated several steps, out of range of her grasping hands. “You live, Cheetara, that is all that matters to me. Make the most of your time in the mortal world. Do whatever you must to be happy.” Again, he glanced over his shoulder. “I have to go. Panthro is waiting for me.”

“He’s... there?”

The apparition nodded. “We lead the way. Don’t be too soon in following.” He smiled, the last she would ever see on his face. “Goodbye, Cheetara. Live long and live well.”

The light around him began to fade. Another step back took him to the gloom and his glow was gone forever. The light of a new day took its place and she looked to the window and the rising dawn far in the distance. How easily continued the circle of life and death, unmarked except by those it touched. The sun of this alien world rose on a new day, the first of many she would have to live without him in it, and in the other room, their children slept, blissfully ignorant of their loss.

For their sake, she had to survive. For their sake, she knew she would.

*Continued in **Chapter Nine: Reckoning***