

All Good Things

The sequel to 'Breaking the Code'

By Spaced Angel

Chapter Nine: Reckoning

A blue planet, coloured with patches of white and larger landmasses of green, filled the forward view screen of the ship. Lion-O watched Third Earth grow in size as they approached and wondered if he would ever lose the feeling of coming home that always accompanied this sight. Despite the many years since New Thundera had been settled, this place would forever have a special place in his heart. If anything, it felt more like home than Thundera. It was where his fondest memories were. Today it was where his friends were.

“We’re almost there?”

The voice, with its obvious ring of relief, made him turn from the screen to smile at its owner. Lily looked only slightly less queasy than when they had left Thundera several hours before. It was a puzzle to Lion-O from whom she had inherited this space sickness. Repeated journeys did not bother him at all, and her mother had been equally at ease in space or on solid ground.

The worse Lexi had ever suffered was sea sickness; Lion-O could remember a time when they had taken a boat out on a lake so calm that the water seemed to be as glass. Barely a few strokes from the shore, Lexi had started complaining that her stomach was churning and that she would rather throw herself overboard than continue. Lion-O remembered her laughter as he took her in his arms and waded back to shore. That had been a good afternoon, all the more precious in his memory now. Not long after that she had been taken from him.

He pushed his sadness to the back of his mind and managed a smile for his daughter. “Another hour or so and we’ll be home,” he said.

Her eyebrows raised a fraction. “*Thundera* is home,” she said. “This is just a place we’re obliged to visit.”

Lion-O sighed, wishing she would one day come to love Third Earth as much as she did. It was probably his imagination, but here the air seemed fresher, the colours more vivid, and the scent of the flowers sweeter. If he was getting sentimental in his old age, at least he could console himself with the thought that it was bringing him happiness.

“What is this meeting about anyway?” Lily wanted to know. “Why does it have to be held here and not on Thundera?”

Lion-O knew that she was fully aware of the reasons. If she was trying to make a point, she would find him an unresponsive sparring partner. “The meeting is held on Third Earth because it concerns us all. This is the only place we can be together, as well you know.”

“All?” she queried tartly. “Are you including *her* in that generalisation, father?”

She was pushing all the right buttons and Lion-O had to fight the temptation to respond. They had had this conversation many times before and they could reach no common ground. "If you mean Cheetara, then yes, she will be attending."

"Why? Thundercat business has nothing to do with her."

"This isn't Thundercat business."

"Then what's so urgent that Pumyra can drag you halfway across the galaxy for a meeting with traitors and murderers?"

"Cheetara is no--" He stopped himself just in time. The light of satisfaction glowing in Lily's eyes told him that she was revelling in her near triumph. "I'll not discuss this with you now, Lily."

"*Lilandra*," she corrected him. "That is my name."

Lion-O had to bite his tongue and remind himself that she was old enough to make her own choices. Not that the inflated name had been her choice; he could guess who had suggested it to her. As his sole heir, there were plenty of people willing to give her advice, not all of it to his liking. He heard the words of the disdainful nobles in her condemnation of Third Earth and saw the guidance of sycophants in her conduct and dress. There were some days when he had trouble recognising her as the little girl who had clung to his leg and shied away from strangers. Looking at her now, in her expensive gold dress and perfectly-manicured nails, he could not help wishing for the return of that mucky-faced kitten that had made him laugh and brought so much happiness into his life. He knew that kittens grew up, but that did not stop him remembering those early years fondly.

Well, then, *Lilandra*," he said, conceding to her wishes, "You know my views on the subject. You will treat my friends with respect."

"Even if they have blood on their hands?"

Lion-O held up his palm, indicating that he had had enough of this conversation.

"You can't face it, can you?" she said, sensing that she had touched a very raw nerve. "What is it, father? Do you have feelings for her, is that it?"

"Enough!" he roared. She had gone too far and she knew it. "We have shared more than you could ever know. How I feel about Cheetara is based on friendship and loyalty, nothing more."

The door opened abruptly as a Thundercat rushed into the chamber, alerted to trouble by the raised voices.

"Is everything all right, my lord?" he asked, a lynx called Lyndox.

Lion-O nodded. "Yes, we're fine."

Lyndox saluted, his blank expression offering no insight into what he really thought of the altercation between father and daughter. "Would you like us to stay, sir?"

From his statement, Lion-O realised that Lyndox had not come alone. Standing outside in the corridor, he caught a glimpse of a red and black striped mane that could only belong to one person. "We'll be landing soon, Lyndox. Is everything in order?"

"I was in the process of completing my duties."

“Then Cyan can stay. Thank you, Lyndox.”

The lynx nodded and muttered something to his colleague. A little sheepishly, Cyan entered the chamber, casting wary glances at a furious-faced Lily.

“You wanted me, sir?” he asked.

“Not particularly,” Lily said icily. Her gaze switched to Lion-O. “Why him?”

“Because he’s here,” Lion-O said reasonably.

She snorted with disgust and stalked towards the door. “And you have the gall to accuse other people of nepotism,” she said on her way out.

Lion-O smiled to himself, conceding that perhaps she was right. He had seen to it that Cyan was promoted above the others who had entered Cats’ Lair earlier than he had and had ensured that he was included in the honour guard on the flagship. He had heard the grumbles, but no one could deny that Cyan was an exceptional Thundercat. He had come top in all his classes and excelled in a number of marital disciplines.

No one could doubt that he deserved promotion. Whether he deserved it so fast was another matter. Lion-O regarded that as nobody’s business but his. He was Lord of the Thundercats after all. In some areas at least he was still master of his domain.

In that capacity, he had fended off the awkward questions, using Cyan's intelligence and talents as reason enough to satisfy the curious. To admit that his conscience would allow him to do no other he knew would not be acceptable. To his mind, it was the least he owed the boy.

It still pained him deeply to think that Tygra had seen no other way to protect his family than to sacrifice his own life. He had not come to the Lord of Thundera, his friend, for help, but had turned to enemies. Lion-O was having difficulty coming to terms with the thought that the reason Tygra had not come to him was because he lacked faith in him. He had tried to tell himself that he was wrong, but still came the reproachful voices in the dead of night taunting him for his failings towards his friends. If they were right, then the least he could do was to use every power at his disposal to help Tygra’s son.

Looking at the boy now, a month shy of his twentieth birthday, Lion-O was struck by the remarkable similarities between father and son. The older he got, the more he took on his father’s noble countenance. There was something else too, a refinement to the bone structure of his face that Lion-O could only attribute to his mother. With that thought in mind, he found a common frame of reference with which to break the ice.

“Your mother will be pleased to see you,” he said. “It’s been a while since you were on Third Earth.”

Cyan bowed his head respectfully. “It is indeed, sir, but I have had news from my mother and sister. Both are well, so they tell me.”

Lion-O smiled at the boy’s formality. “Sir, is it? Come now, Cyan, I used to send you presents. Why so formal?”

A grin immediately lit his face. “Yes, I remember. You sent me a spaceboard for my tenth birthday, the best present I ever got.” The smile slowly faded. “We had to leave that behind when the Mutants invaded. We had to leave a lot behind over the years.”

Lion-O frowned, sorry at having been the instigator of unhappy memories. "I'm sorry," he said. "Life must have been difficult."

Cyan shook his head. "It could have been worse. I've no complaints. I've seen more worlds than most will ever manage on Thundera."

"I almost envy you," said Lion-O.

"Oh? I thought the Lord of the Thundercats saw all."

Lion-O allowed himself a small laugh. "Only within Thundera's limited horizon." He gazed out at the large planet that was obscuring the view of the distant stars. "Truth is, Cyan, I've always had a hankering to see what was out there for myself. I feel as though I have lived a second-hand life."

"You, sir?"

"Yes. I've spent my whole life either battling with the enemies of Thundera or being its king. Other people have lived and explored and travelled. I've just existed, living vicariously through other's adventures." He sighed, feeling a whimsical mood settling over his soul. More often now, his thoughts turned to what could have been, if his life had taken a different direction. "I just wish I'd had the chance to be myself instead of what others expected of me."

He continued to stare at the view screen until he became aware that some time had passed since Cyan had spoken. A sense of awkwardness pervaded the chamber. Realising that their conversation had taken a sombre turn, he smiled and tried to find some lighter subject to distract his more introspective thoughts.

"Well, Cyan, are you happy at Cats' Lair?"

He seemed taken aback at the sudden change in topic. "Oh, yes," he said falteringly. "It is everything I expected. Thank you, sir."

The gratitude made Lion-O wince. "No need to thank me, Cyan. You are an exceptional Thundercat. You are an asset to Cats' Lair. And the others, they treat you well?"

There was a momentary pause before he replied. "Well enough."

"Meaning?"

"I am an outsider. At times, their ways seem as curious to me as mine to them. I have found an air of mystery works in my favour, both with my fellow Thundercats and..." Cyan smiled. "And with the opposite sex." The faintest blush touched his cheeks. "If you'll forgive my impertinence, sir."

"And not mention it to your mother?"

"Indeed."

Lion-O grinned. "Of course. Your secret is safe with me. But no one could expect a young man such as yourself to lead a hermit's life."

"The life is suited to some."

Lion-O wondered if that remark was directed at him. His curiosity must have showed on his face, for Cyan quickly qualified his statement.

“I mean, I never really had the chance to form any lasting relationships during our travels. You might say I never knew what I was missing.”

“I see,” said Lion-O, not sure if he was entirely convinced by Cyan’s explanation. “In that case, I am glad that Thundera has opened your eyes to the possibilities.”

“Yes, sir.”

He managed a smile to ease the lines of concern that had formed on Cyan’s brow. Whatever he had meant, Lion-O had gone past the stage where he found interest in his private life intrusive. The fact of the matter was simple for those who had an interest. There had been no one else since Lexi, whatever the gossip-mongers said to the contrary. Outwardly, he pretended it suited him, but lately he was not so sure. He had grown long used to being alone again and had invested his time and energy in his daughter. Now she had grown up and was drifting away from him, he found that he missed the presence of another to fill his empty rooms with laughter and to share his dinner table.

He knew he could have had his pick. If it were simply sex he wanted, there was no shortage of willing females ready to accommodate the desires of the Lord of Thundera. Companionship was harder to find. Trusting someone, after all these years, would be hard. Too many people wanted too much of him - a favour for their family, promotion or economic preferences. Unattached, he was unmoved by all attempts to change his mind; he knew his judgement would be compromised if the situation were reversed. It was simply easier, if not happier, to remain alone. The good of Thundera demanded it. Frankly, though, he was sick to the heart of meeting her expectations.

His thoughts had brought back the spectre of his earlier melancholy and it settled over him like a grey cloak. He could almost see it at the edges of his vision, creeping in like growing slime. Relentless in its slide, it clouded his sight until he viewed the world through two tiny pinpricks. With it came such a strange feeling in his head, confusing him as to whether he stood on his own two feet or floated lifeless in the air. Somewhere in the background came the intermittent wail of a siren and a fresh breeze on his face. Consciousness returned, his sight cleared and he found himself looking up at Cyan’s worried face.

“Sir, are you all right?”

The question made no sense, nor did there seem to be any good reason why he was slumped in the captain’s chair. He made an effort to sit up, only to feel the lightness return to his head.

“Take it easy,” said Cyan, gently pushing him back into the support of the chair. “I’ve sent for your daughter.”

Lion-O opened his mouth to ask why, only for a strangled, croaking noise to emerge.

“You fainted,” Cyan explained. “How are you feeling now?”

There was a flurry of activity from the direction of the door and Lily suddenly appeared.

“What have you done to him?” she said, directing her anger at Cyan as she pushed him out of the way. “Father, are you ill?”

Fully in command of his body and senses, Lion-O sat up, wet his lips and tried to allay her anxiety. “Lily, I’m fine. Cyan, thank you for your help.”

“Well, what happened?” she asked.

“He fainted,” Cyan said, earning himself her most withering look.

“Why? What were you doing?”

“We were talking,” said Lion-O, reflecting how quickly their roles as parent and child could be reversed. “Lily, really I’m okay now.”

She did not look convinced. “I’m glad to hear it.” She glanced over her shoulder at Cyan. “You can go now,” she said dismissively.

Cyan looked for approval to Lion-O. He nodded his consent and Cyan left. When the door closed behind him, Lily continued her interrogation.

“Is this connected with those headaches you’ve been having?”

The question took Lion-O by surprise. “How did you know about them?”

“I’ve seen you taking pills when you think no one is looking. You should see a doctor, father.”

“No.” For some reason, the fact that he had not been as clever in his deception annoyed him greatly. “It’s nothing.”

Lily sighed. “It’s no sign of weakness if you need help.”

“Did I say that? I’m fine, I tell you.”

Lily held up her hands in defeat and got to her feet. “Very well. Do as you wish. But the next time you faint, do it in private.” She cast an evil look towards the door through which Cyan had recently passed. “I expect he will be telling everyone how he saved your life.”

Lion-O smiled at her irritation. “No, he won’t.”

“Because you knew his parents? A poor basis for your trust, father.”

Lion-O got to his feet. “Lily, one day, you’ll learn the value of friendship. I just hope it’s not too late.”

He could feel her gaze burning into the back of his head as he left the chamber, but did not stop. Their arrival on Third Earth was imminent and he had a headache thumping at the base of his skull. He would be expected to be everything a king should be – calm, composed and not giving to fainting without warning. Lily was right about that. So far, only Snarf and Cyan knew. It was only a matter of time before it happened in less private surroundings. Then what would they think of their king?

The foaming globule of saliva landed within inches of Bengali’s foot and the gap-toothed spitter grinned with gloating satisfaction. He would have felt the fury of a fist too had not Cheetara pulled him away and forced him on.

“Leave it, Bengali,” she said firmly. “He isn’t worth it.”

“Cheetara, it isn’t right.”

Her eyebrows twitched upwards a fraction. “They might say the same about my being here.”

Even after all this time, she had the uncanny knack of knowing how to diffuse a tense situation. Bengali felt his anger fade away and he banished it with a deep sigh.

“It never gets any easier, does it?”

Cheetara shook her head. “They despise me, but they tolerate me. If I had my choice, I would not remain.”

“Why then?”

“For Chaya. She needs the stability of a safe home. At least on Third Earth, whatever its faults, she can have that. It is what her father wanted.”

The mention of his name was enough to open old wounds. Time had been a healer, but Bengali knew it would ever lay on his conscience that he had let an old friend go to his death and not tried harder to stop him. He had held back from begging Cheetara’s forgiveness. She would give it, of course, but he would always wonder if she had really meant it or said it out of kindness. He had come to the decision that he did not want to risk knowing.

“Then why did you agree?” he ventured.

Cheetara remained tight-lipped for a long time before replying. “I didn’t,” she said finally. “He didn’t ask me. He just went ahead with what he thought was right.”

Her anger had not lost any of its fury with the passing of time. Two years and four months to be exact. In that time, Cheetara had returned to Third Earth and, while Cyan had gone to Thundera to pursue his calling as a Thundercat, she and Chaya had settled to a strange sort of existence, encountering reactions that swung wildly between blank indifference to outright hate. The hate had become less vehement, seen now only occasionally in the actions of morons who thought it clever to make contempt public by spitting at her in the street. Not for the first time, Bengali questioned the wisdom of Tygra’s selfless act, a thought he never dare to put into words, especially in front of Cheetara.

“I’m sorry,” he said, not knowing what else to say.

Cheetara sighed. “Yes, so am I. I didn’t mean to burden you with my troubles.”

“It’s never a burden, Cheetara.”

She glanced at him. “Don’t blame yourself, Bengali. A person is responsible for their own actions.”

“Meaning Tygra?”

She nodded. “It was never his intention that you suffer by his decision.”

He looked away from her earnest gaze, finding distraction in the colourful market stalls set up along the bridge leading to Cats’ Lair. “I was there. I did nothing to stop him.”

Cheetara caught his arm and brought him to a halt. “Ben, no one could have stopped him. He was ill, did he tell you that?”

“At the very end. He told me he was dying.”

“Then understand and forgive yourself.”

“Like you have?”

A rueful smile touched her lips. "I understand why he did it, but I can't forgive him for leaving us. I wish..." She paused, taking a moment to swallow and banish the tears that had come to her eyes. "I wish we could have been together." She stroked his arm. "It's a comfort to me knowing you were with him at the end."

Any grip he thought he had on his emotions fell away like silken cords. On an impulse, he hugged her, surprising her as much as the crowds around them.

"I am so, so sorry," he said. "I tried to save him for you, believe me, Cheetara, I did."

"I know," she said softly.

He released her enough to meet her gaze. "I should have visited more often. I couldn't."

"You've been busy on Thundera."

He shook his head. "No. Truth is I stayed away because I didn't know if you'd want to see me. Plus, you're right. I do hold myself responsible."

There was a slight pause before she answered. "I'm glad you've said that. I had thought you might have blamed me."

He felt his jaw drop open. "No, never. Why would you think that?"

"Because he did it for me. Because it was my fault we had to live in exile." She sighed. "I suppose I do have to accept some portion of the blame. It was my decision to pursue Jageena that led us down this path."

"Only after she tried to kill both of you."

Cheetara's eyes clouded with the memories of times past. "Seems a lifetime ago now, yet sometimes in the dead of night, it seems so real."

"For me too," Bengali murmured.

"Then what a fine pair we are." The smile had returned to her voice. "I know you're meant to be my escort today, but I think we're starting to make people talk."

She inclined her head slightly to the hands he still rested on her shoulders. "Sorry," he said. "We should go. The others will be waiting for us."

"What is this mysterious meeting about?" Cheetara asked as they made their way up the steps.

Bengali shrugged. "I don't know. Pumyra didn't tell me."

"Really." It was more of a statement than question and Bengali could tell from the small lines that had creased Cheetara's brow that she was perplexed, and not only about the reason why she had been asked to come to Cats' Lair.

"We don't get much time together any more," he said, by way of explanation. "She's been busy with something here on Third Earth and I'm always on the go. Our paths cross rarely now."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Cheetara said, her tone assuring him that she meant it.

He managed a reassuring smile for her. "It's only while we're busy. We'll be able to spend more time together soon."

"I hope so, Ben. Sometimes tomorrow never comes."

They had reached the main door of the Lair. Cheetara stopped and met his gaze.

“Think about it, that’s all I’m saying,” she said, gently patting his arm. “You belong together.”

“I’m second-in-command of the Thundercats, Cheetara. Lion-O needs me.”

“So does Pumyra.”

Before he could answer, the door opened and Snarfer bounded out, twittering with excitement at seeing them.

“You’re a sight for sore eyes, yes sir,” he chirruped. “And you’re late. We thought you weren’t coming.”

“Wild Mutants couldn’t keep me away,” said Cheetara.

She flashed him a smile and followed Snarfer into the Lair. Bengali lingered on the threshold, suddenly aware of an icy mass in the pit of his stomach. Something Cheetara had said had touched a raw nerve, something that his subconscious had yet to reveal to his waking hours. Nothing lasted forever, that was true. But that was no reason to expect trouble.

Pumyra had been occupied with a project lately about which she was strangely evasive. Now he gave it some thought, it did seem odd. Usually she used him as a sounding board to test theories and talk through difficulties she had encountered in her work. She had not done that recently. In fact, really thinking about it, she had not confided in him since Tygra had died. It was probably nothing more than a coincidence, but he was starting to wish he knew her reasons for calling this meeting.

Hurrying after Cheetara, he managed to catch up with her before she entered the Council Chamber. The soft murmur of voices could be heard from inside, recognisable despite the door that stood between them. Bengali reached out to open it, but Cheetara caught his arm. Surprised, he glanced round at her. Her breath was coming in short gasps and her face had become pale. Realisation dawned on him and he hastily withdrew his hand.

“Is this your first time back here since...” He paused, trying to find the right words. “Since the attack?”

She swallowed hard and nodded. “I... need a moment,” she said. “You go ahead. I just need to splash some water on my face.”

Bengali watched her with concern as she wandered away down the corridor. He understood her reaction. Although he had been back to the Lair many times since, the memory of the sight that had met his eyes in the aftermath of the attack upon his friends was still vivid. By the time he had arrived on Third Earth, the bodies were gone, but the gore remained. Pools of blood had littered the floor like colourful rugs, their edges ragged in places where bodies had lain, and the presence of others marked in the red footprints that had created crazy patterns leading in and out of the room.

“Snarfer, go with her,” he said suddenly.

“She’s knows where the bathroom is.”

“Yes, I know, but will you go anyway? Please,” he added. “Having got her here safely, I don’t want any ‘accidents’ occurring while she’s in the Lair.”

Snarfer blinked up at him. “You think someone might try to hurt her?”

“Yes,” he replied, thinking back to the incident in the street.

“Then of course I’ll do it, yes sir!” Snarfer said, as he galloped away.

The door of the Council Chamber slid back at his touch and admitted him into a scene that could have come straight from their earliest days on Third Earth. The others were there, habit making them take their usual places. They were older, but the conversation was just as animated. The only difference was that now there were spaces around the table.

Forcing his eyes away from the empty chairs, Bengali entered, only to be immediately confronted by Lion-O.

“I thought you had gone to get Cheetara. Isn’t she coming?” he wanted to know.

“Yes, she’s gone to freshen up. She’ll be back in a minute.”

“Was she…” Lion-O hesitated, his eyes shifting uncertainly from side to side before he was able to continue. “Was she all right?”

“As well as can be expected. You can ask her yourself when she gets here.”

The look on Lion-O’s face suggested that that would not have been his first choice. “If you say she’s fine, then I’ll take your word for it.”

Bengali shook his head. “I never thought I’d see the day when you were afraid of Cheetara.”

“Me? I’m not.” His indignation was too righteous to ring true. He saw that Bengali was not deceived and sighed. “Maybe a little. It’s just… we haven’t spoken much since she returned to Third Earth.”

“Much?”

Lion-O nodded his defeat. “Yes, all right, hardly at all. We had a slight disagreement.”

“Over?”

“Things,” Lion-O said evasively. “Does it matter?”

Bengali smiled knowingly. “No. But it does explain why you sent me to fetch her.”

“That was part of the reason.”

“The other?”

“Lily,” Lion-O replied. “We had words on the journey here.”

Bengali said nothing, watching as Lion-O pressed a fingertip to his temple and gently massaged the area. In matters between father and daughter, it was best not to interfere. In other matters, however, he felt that his position as second-in-command and friend entitled him to say something.

“Those headaches still bothering you?” he asked.

Lion-O quickly looked up and removed his hand from the side of his head. “You know as well?”

Bengali shrugged. “It’s been pretty obvious these past few months. You should get Pumyra to check you out while you’re here.”

“I’ve already had this speech from Lily, but,” he said, pausing slightly, “while we’re on the subject, do you know why Pumyra summoned us here?”

For the second time that day, Bengali had to admit to ignorance. Lion-O was clearly dissatisfied, but seeing that further questioning would get him the same result, he left Bengali to join the others around the table. An empty seat was available beside Lynx-O, who was listening with great interest to WilyKit’s latest news. Seeing Bengali heading towards her, she beamed at finding another listener.

“Well, what do you think?” she said, offering the shiny badge she wore on her chest for his inspection.

“Very nice. What is it?”

He knew, of course. But teasing her earned him a grin from her brother and a reproving look from WilyKit.

“I’ve been promoted,” she said indignantly. “Can’t you see what it says?”

“I’m sure he can,” said Lynx-O, smiling. “You have every reason to be proud, WilyKit. You are a fine example to all Thundera.”

“Am I?” she said icily. “I thought *certain* people didn’t like the fact that I’d left to pursue my career outside Thundera.”

Her remark had a barb in it aimed at Lion-O, except, from the smile on his face, it was obvious that he was not about to rise to the bait.

“What you do with your life is your concern,” said Lynx-O. “Who is to say that those choices have been wrong?”

“He does,” she said, jerking her head in her brother’s direction.

WilyKat managed the ghost of a smile. “I’ve only ever said that I can’t see why you would want to keep galloping halfway across the galaxy after the criminal elements of the universe.”

“Because I enjoy it? Has that ever occurred to you?” She snorted with displeasure and brushed a microscopic speck of dirt from her new badge. “Anyway, now I’m an Evil Chaser First Class, I get my own space bike, just like Mandora had.”

“Wow,” WilyKat said with mock enthusiasm. “Like we all need one of those.”

WilyKit glowered at him. “At least I’m not some silly ambassador on Ursa.”

“And like you, Kit, I enjoy it. In fact,” he said, lowering his hands palm down on the table, “I’m thinking of staying there permanently.” His gaze had shifted in Lion-O’s direction. “With permission, of course.

Lion-O exchanged glances with Bengali, failing to hide his disappointment at this news. Not so long ago, he had confided his hope that one day WilyKat would make an excellent Lord of the Thundercats, in the absence of a male heir of his own blood. The gauche teen cub of yesteryear had become a fine young man and worthy representative of Thundera on Ursa. The bears respected him and he in turn soaked up their knowledge and their ways eagerly. He was the most experienced of the new generation of Thundercats and the only one Lion-O was ever willing to consider his successor. WilyKat’s request had ended any possibility of that.

“We’ll see,” Lion-O said shortly.

“I won’t change my mind,” said WilyKat. “I’m decided.”

“But... but,” began his sister. “If you stay on Ursa, I’ll never see you. The Bears don’t like Control interfering in their affairs and won’t allow us access.”

“They will to you, because you are my sister. We’ll come to some arrangement.”

“I was hoping you would accept a more permanent position on Thundera,” said Lion-O.

WilyKat’s steady gaze did not falter as he smiled. “I’m never going to be Lord of the Thundercats. There are others who are better qualified.”

“You sound sure of yourself,” said Bengali, slightly amused at the grave tone of his voice. That mischievous Thunderkitten of days gone by loomed large in his memory, making it hard for him to take WilyKat seriously.

“The Bears have certain ways,” WilyKat went on, “of marking an individual’s path through the course of infinity.”

“The future?” Lion-O asked. “Not even the Sword of Omens can tell of things that may come to pass.”

WilyKat nodded. “It is more of a prediction based on the known facts. My path leads me away from Thundera.”

“They say anything about me?” WilyKit said brightly, trying to lighten the suddenly sombre mood that had descended over the chamber.

“Much.” WilyKat grinned. “Mainly that you talk too much.”

He was near enough for her to try to punish his impudence with a friendly clump around the head. Years of perfecting the Ursan fighting techniques had sharpened his instincts so that he was able to dodge out of the way. Instead, he caught her hand and to her surprise slapped it down on the table.

“How...?” WilyKit breathed.

“I predicted it. It’s what you always do, WilyKit.”

She snatched her hand away and rubbed her sore wrist. “Are you saying I’m predictable?”

“That’s why I love you, sister.”

Any further sibling quarrelling was interrupted by the opening of the door and the entrance of Snarf and Snarfer, closely followed by Cheetara and Pumyra. The focus of the discussion abruptly changed and WilyKit bounded over to Cheetara to hug her. Only Lion-O remained aloof from the exchange of news, Bengali noticed, although he was quick to catch the glances that passed between the two. Whatever had caused their argument had left both sides still smarting.

Leaving that puzzle aside, he turned his attention to another and the reason that had brought them here. Pumyra had deposited an armful of papers on the table and was struggling to set up a small projector.

“Here, let me,” he said, fixing the cable to the machine with an ease that was eluding her.

“Thanks,” she mumbled. Her efforts to avoid meeting his eyes were determined enough to make him wonder what he had done to upset her this time. “You?” She seemed thrown by the question. “No, nothing,” she said hurriedly.

“Then what is it?”

She shook her head. “I’ll tell everyone together. This concerns us all, Bengali.”

Her attention went back to her papers and he caught her arm to make her look at him. Being wrong was one thing, but being shut out without good reason was sheer torture.

“What is so bad that you can’t tell me?” he whispered. “Pumyra, I know I’ve been busy lately, but that doesn’t mean I love you any less.”

She managed a small smile and he was sure he saw the beginnings of tears come to her eyes. “I know,” she said. “We’ll talk later, I promise.”

She nodded to Lion-O, who got to his feet and called the meeting to order. The others drifted back to their seats and waited expectantly for him to begin. Clearing his throat, he glanced at the familiar faces gathered around the table.

“Thank you all for coming,” he said. “Being here today, gathered around this table, it seems so much like old times. Yet all of us are aware that times have changed. So first, I would like to propose a toast.” He lifted the goblet that was on the table before him. “To absent friends.”

The toast was solemnly observed and once again the lure of the empty chairs drew Bengali’s gaze towards them. Long after Lion-O had started talking again, he was still transfixed. Only when he realised that he was not alone in his contemplation, that Cheetara too could not take her eyes from the space beside her, did he finally break his reverie. At that moment, distracted by his slight movement from the other side of the table, Cheetara looked round and met his eyes. For a brief second, he was allowed to read there all the pain of her loss and the continuing grief of her loneliness. Then she blinked and her composure was restored just as Lion-O handed over the meeting to Pumyra.

“I asked you, my friends, to be here today,” Pumyra began, “because we have a decision to make. Without our agreement, what I have to say here today cannot leave this room.” She hesitated and when she next spoke her voice was hushed. “The consequences would be too terrible to contemplate.”

“Too terrible?” asked Lion-O. “What on Third Earth has happened, Pumyra?”

She gave a half-snort of laughter. “The irony is that it didn’t happen on Third Earth,” she replied. “Here, this will explain matters.” She activated the projector and its bright beam of coloured light coalesced in the shape of a body that slowly rotated as if to silent music above the table. “First, an explanation, and I apologise in advance for any pain I may cause you, Cheetara. It does concern Tygra.”

Cheetara nodded, saying nothing.

“The last time I saw him,” Pumyra went on, “Tygra told me he was ill. He said his condition had reached a stage where it was untreatable.”

“Pumyra, is this really necessary?” said Lion-O, glancing at Cheetara to see her reaction.

“It’s fine,” said Cheetara. “I know all this. Please, Pumyra, go on.”

“I didn’t want to believe him,” said Pumyra, “so before he left, I asked if I could run a few scans to see if there was something I could do to help. There wasn’t.” She indicated the hologram, touching an area on the midriff of the projected body. Ripples ran from where her finger had been, bringing with it greater magnification of the chief organs in that area. “This is what I found. The red areas indicate dead or dying tissue.”

She did not need to explain further. Even to a layman, it was clear to see that the large mass of the liver was a mottled mess of red.

“What...” Lion-O had to clear his throat before he could continue. “What would cause something like that?”

Pumyra shook her head slowly. “I didn’t know what to make of it at first. It looked like radiation poisoning. That would account for the deterioration of organ function, eventually leading to complete failure.” Again, she indicated the affected area on the hologram. “Liver function at the time of the scan was down to twenty-two per cent and there was heavy scarring on the lungs. In some places...” She drew a deep breath. “In some places, the scar tissue had adhered to the rib cage. The condition would have been very painful.”

An awkward silence fell over the room when she finished speaking. Bengali felt his eyes drawn to Cheetara, who had her own gaze fixed firmly on the table. When she finally looked up, it was to address Pumyra.

“But Tygra was never exposed to radiation levels of the sort that would this type of accumulative damage,” she said. “It couldn’t have been that.”

“I know,” said Pumyra. “It was a mystery. I thought nothing more of it until I came across another case during a routine scan at the infertility clinic. The patient showed the same symptoms, although to a lesser degree.”

She flicked a switch on the projector and another holographic body appeared. Again, the organs showed the same signs of disease and decay, although the red mottling was less pronounced.

“The more I looked, the more cases I found,” Pumyra went on. “In many elderly patients, the condition seems to have been written off as natural causes. In some cases, this condition did not directly kill them, so that it was not listed as the cause of death. But this patient...” She trailed off into silence as she stared at the hologram. “There are no obvious links, other than that they both lived for a while on Third Earth and were both Thundercats. The outcome will be the same, however. Based on what Tygra told me, I estimate that this patient has eighteen months to live, two years at the most.”

“That’s terrible,” said Lion-O. “Do they know?”

Pumyra nodded. “Yes, they know.”

“Can you tell us who is it? Perhaps if we know we can find a common cause.”

“She won’t tell you,” said Snarfer. “Have you never heard of patient confidentiality?”

“In this case, the patient does not object,” said Pumyra.

“Then who is it?” asked Lion-O.

A long pause ensued, in which Pumyra seemed to be having difficulty in getting the words from her mouth. When she could finally answer Lion-O's question, an unnatural calmness had come upon her that jarred with the seriousness of the situation.

"Me," she said.

Someone let out a gasp. Someone said something. What it was Bengali had trouble in understanding. The world had come to a shuddering, shattering halt. Sound had ceased to have meaning. Time had concertinaed to one terrible pinpoint, centred on that one simple word.

"No," he murmured. "It's not true."

"It is," Pumyra said. "I was going to tell you."

"I don't believe it," he said, shaking his head as he got to his feet. "Look at you. You look well. Does she look well, Lion-O?" He turned for support to his friends, only to see the same expressions of shock etched on the faces of the others around the table. "You've made a mistake, Pumyra. Run the scans again."

She rounded the table to come over to where he stood. "Bengali, it's all right. Please, sit down. I have more to tell you."

"More?" said Lion-O.

She nodded. "I'm afraid so. I know now the cause of the condition and because of that, I need to know from you, my friends, how to proceed.

Bengali flopped back into his chair as Pumyra left him to start a slow amble around the table. She had brought his world crashing down and his insides were knotted into a tight ball of fear and grief. Earlier, he had told Cheetara that they had all the time in the world. Now that time was running out. He wanted to grab her and run far from this place, away from the others, but Pumyra was fast ending his hopes by her continued revelations.

"You see, there is a link," she was saying when he concentrated on the sound of her voice. "I had to think long and hard about it, but it was there, staring me in the face all the time." She paused behind Bengali's chair and rested her hand on his shoulder. "I'm sure we all remember what happened with the Erepii tried to take over Thundera."

"How can we forget?" said WilyKit. "They wanted to eat everyone and use our bodies as their hosts."

"Yes. Call them Erepii or Scourge, but their aims were the same. They needed us, our energy, to feed their existence. And not just anyone would do; their livestock had to be in perfect condition. So they came with healing and for a while the people of Thundera were the healthiest in the galaxy." She sighed. "I always wondered how the Erepii managed to cure so many people. The truth is that they didn't. Their healing was no miracle, but a sham. The curative energy was not given to us, but we produced it. We healed ourselves for their benefit."

"I don't understand," said Lion-O. "Some people were seriously injured. They recovered."

Pumyra half-smiled. "The body is a wonderful thing. It can heal itself given time and the right conditions. The Erepii accelerated those conditions with that healing elixir of theirs. The stress put on our bodies by doing that caused long-term damage that only now is becoming evident."

She returned to her seat. "If they knew, they didn't care. We were only useful to them for feeding for a short while. How many people ever escaped their clutches?"

"Not many," Lion-O agreed. "So what are you saying? That our bodies are wearing out?"

"Faster than if our lives had been allowed to run their natural course. Tygra was given massive doses of that elixir of theirs. The strain on his body to keep healing him caused his vital organs to shut down. It took time, of course."

"But he was being drugged," said WilyKat. "You weren't, Pumyra."

"The answer to that is simple. The degree of damage depends on the amount of healing needed at the time when the elixir was administered." Her gaze switched to her tightly-clenched hands on the table in front of her. "In my case, I know that... that I was severely injured. I might have been clinically dead for a while, I don't know. The stress of having to literally bring me back to life has caused my present condition." She lifted her gaze to glance at Cheetara and Lion-O. "That is true for anyone who was similarly affected."

"That includes me," said Cheetara flatly. "I know I died. I know Tygra gave me some of his blood that had the elixir in it to restore me. Is the prognosis the same?"

Pumyra shook her head. "I can't say until I examine you. As I explained, the damage will depend on the individual condition at the time."

Lion-O suddenly swore and got to his feet. "Damn it all! Why now?" he said, finding himself a place by the window to stare out at the view of the settlement around the Lair.

"Everyone dies eventually," said Lynx-O. "That is an inevitable part of being alive. We at least know that our days are numbered."

"Small comfort," said Lion-O bitterly. "Is there nothing we can do?"

"We can decide whether to make this general knowledge," said Pumyra. "That is the purpose of this meeting."

"We have to. There's no question about it."

"Not necessarily," said Lynx-O. "From what I have heard, this will affect only a portion of the population."

"There were thousands on Thundera when the Erepii came," said Cheetara. "Everyone was exposed to their so-called 'healing'."

"But the majority were healthy," said Pumyra. "Those who had the most benefit from the Erepii's influence were the elderly and the terminally ill. They are the groups who will show the most deterioration. However, as I have found, age and other causes of death are masking the discovery of this condition." She chewed for a moment on her bottom lip. "Actually, if this revelation never leaves this room, no one need ever know."

"So we all just crawl away into a corner and die?" Bengali said angrily. "No. I won't do it."

"If news of this condition becomes general knowledge, there will be widespread panic," said Lynx-O calmly. "Pumyra has already explained that only those who were grievously injured or ill at the time the Erepii came to Thundera will be affected to any great degree by this condition."

"I was exposed to it," WilyKit said suddenly. "Does that mean I'm going to die?"

“Were you ill or injured at the time?” Pumyra asked.

WilyKit shook her head.

“Then you should be fine. There would have been little or no strain placed on your body. Similarly, Lynx-O and WilyKat are not affected, because they were never exposed to it. This really only applies to myself, Lion-O, Cheetara and Bengali.”

“And me,” spoke up Snarf. “I was there too, don’t forget. Strange though, I’ve never felt better, snarf, snarf.”

“You’ve never looked better either, Uncle Osbert,” said Snarfer. “Why, you don’t look a day over one hundred.”

Snarf purred with irritation. “That’s because I’m not, nephew. Brrr, I’m only 97.”

“So what are you going to do?” asked WilyKat.

“The final decision rests with Lion-O,” said Pumyra.

“And?” Bengali said, directing his question to where Lion-O still stood, arms folded and lost in thought by the window.

“What about the children, those born after the Erepii were destroyed?” Lion-O said quietly.

“The condition isn’t hereditary,” said Pumyra. “They won’t be affected.”

A long moment passed before he spoke again. As he did, his shoulders sank as if under the burden of responsibility he carried, and he kept his gaze fixed on the distant view from the Lair’s window.

“We say nothing.”

“What?!” Bengali said. “Give me one good reason why we should!”

Lion-O gave him a sideways glance. “For the good of Thundera.”

“Thundera be damned!” He thumped his fist on the table out of sheer exasperation. “No, this isn’t right. Everything we’ve ever done has been for ‘the good of Thundera’. And now you ask me to quietly die so I don’t upset anyone? No! In fact, I resign as your second-in-command, effective immediately.”

“No, Ben, you can’t,” said Pumyra calmly. “Lion-O is right. Everything must continue as normal for as long as possible.”

“Normal? With a death sentence hanging over our heads?”

“What good would public revelation achieve?”

The question was fair and he found he did not have an immediate answer. “The people have a right to know that they’re affected by this thing.”

“To greater or lesser degrees,” said Lynx-O.

“We were targeted and so we are the most affected,” said Pumyra. “I’m not happy with that knowledge, but the fact remains. Setting a whole world in turmoil will not change that nor will it solve anything.”

Bengali sank back into his chair and buried his head in his hands. Thundera had always demanded so much from him. Now it demanded his life and that of the woman he loved, he was not sure he was prepared to bow to its needs any longer.

“Then we are agreed,” said Lynx-O. “This news does not leave this room.”

“And when we become ill,” said Bengali, “what then do we tell everyone?”

“It can be blamed on any number of factors. We have all of us led varied lives. Why should anyone look for a single cause?”

With that, Pumyra deactivated the projector. The hologram blinked out of existence. Bengali could not help drawing the comparison with their situation. Their lives were to be extinguished as easily as that light beam and, like it, there would be no trace left behind. Pumyra was right. It was hard to have to live with that kind of knowledge.

“I would like to run medical scans on everyone here, just so I know where we stand,” said Pumyra. “So we can all make... the necessary arrangements.”

“Whatever those might be,” said Lion-O grimly. “I don’t suppose there’s any chance you have made a mistake, Pumyra?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“And Bengali, do you really want to quit?”

He shrugged resentfully. “Do I have a choice? Aren’t Thundercats meant to die in harness?”

“Some of us,” said Lion-O. “I’d appreciate it if you did stay, Ben.”

He knew Lion-O well enough to recognise that as an appeal to his conscience. Lion-O needed him, but then so too did Pumyra. Turning to her for support, he saw her slight nod and the look of understanding in her eyes. His soul sank. As he had already said, what choice did he have?

“I’ll stay,” he said, trying to sigh away his frustration at an impossible situation. “For the time being anyway. If things change and I decide to go, you won’t change my mind again.”

Lion-O nodded. “I understand and accept your terms, Bengali. Thank you.”

He waved the gratitude aside dismissively.

“Well, then,” said Lion-O, surveying the sombre gathering, “I guess it’s over.”

“The meeting?” asked WilyKit.

Lion-O’s eyes travelled back towards the view of Third Earth. “Yes,” he murmured. “That too.”

*Continued in **Chapter Ten: Reciprocity***