

The Final Errand

By thezaxfactor

In the jolts of fated tremors, the stars flinched in seeming terror. Nightfall bore a dank air of omens to Thundera, for her death drew near, and across her face freshly torn chasms belched in torment. Wild eruptions sprang early with the setting of the sun, in turn doubling efforts to ready the ships. Already, panic filled the woken minds of parents; but the dreams of their cubs still sleeping turned to brutal darkness. Doom had fallen. Exodus was underway.

Jaga watched him working, his hands gliding from dial to dial. And even as the windows rattled and the rafters creaked and moaned, it seemed that Claudus' concentration never faltered. Unthinkably, he wore the slightest smile, a smile that warmed Jaga in a way Thundera's fever never could.

"It's finished, Jaga. As long as this connection holds, I can boost the stabilizer."

"Are you... are you sure?"

"Ha, I think I know my way around a relay station."

"No, I mean... I mean are you sure you want to do this? I could..."

"No, Jaga. It's decided. Your fate lies with Liono. I will not be moved. If Thundera should swallow me, at least you will have escaped safely."

Jaga cast his glance away. Claudus had jumped on this opportunity as if no one else could undertake it. As if he were needed nowhere else. "You are selfless and cruel at once, Claudus."

It was a moment before Claudus answered, as he adjusted dials that no longer needed adjusting. "The gravity capsule will get me out in time."

"If there is time."

"Jaga, that sort of talk does neither of us any good." Claudus turned to face his friend, but Jaga could hardly look at him. He knew Claudus was right, but he could not pretend to be so sure of the chances. He needed a sign, a reassurance, some glimpse of hope; but his home was falling to pieces, and the Sword of Omens hung lifeless at his side.

"I'm sorry, Claudus" he said. "It's... it's the Eye. It sleeps, and I cannot awaken it."

Another tremor rattled the station, the fiercest yet; and in that moment Claudus did the unthinkable. He laughed. "Jaga," he whispered smiling, "the Eye cannot quell your every doubt. What's done is done, and what must be done has been foretold."

Jaga recalled that prophecy easily. It had haunted him in dreams and waking since Leonisis had spoken it. *Light to twilight and haven to grave, and one face fair to carry the Code.* Jaga smirked, finally understanding.

"This is it, Jaga. Thundera is no more, and her two Lords must separate at last. Liono is your Lord now, the one face fair, if you will have him."

Jaga stepped forward and took Claudus into his arms, into their final embrace. "Of course I will have him," he whispered. "In him will the Code survive, and I shall protect and guide him as ever I can." The two of them stood together a moment longer, hating the thought of severance. Jaga spoke quietly, almost to himself. "Dark days lie ahead. Nightmare days and empty nights."

"Nightmare days." At that moment, Claudus pulled away. "That's it. That's it, that's the answer!" His face seemed to brighten, and his blind eyes shone with a youthful light, like a cub before a confectioner's window.

Little flakes of paint and plaster jumped up and down on the floor as Thundera purred masochistically, and Jaga took Claudus' arm to steady him. "Answer? What are you talking about?"

"Cheetara's vision," replied Claudus. "You must preserve the Treasures, Jaga. You must call upon Nebulex to lock Thundera's secrets in the Book of Omens, and you must take the Casket with you. Do you understand?"

Jaga put his hand to his mouth, half in wonder, half in contemplation. "You mean, the evil she saw, the reformation under the Moons of PlunDarr? It's Thundera?"

"Yes, Jaga. A New Thundera. Liono has dreamt the same; and he has seen terror and slavery, and cruel eyes in the dark. But it does not have to be that way."

Jaga nodded resolutely. "I understand, and so I leave in haste, a parting far too brief." He paused and bowed his head woefully. "*Shein sar fin, anya simasye.*" May we meet again, somewhere in time.

Claudus put his left hand to Jaga's face and smiled. "We shall." Then with his right hand he took Jaga by the wrist. "Be brave," he said, "and may Liono share in your bravery. My dearest friend, my only faith, farewell."

Hesitating, Jaga turned and strode from the dome, each step heavier if swifter, each breath more tense for sheltering a sob. As he started the battered ThunderClaw that had carried them there, he spotted Kano stalking the abandoned thoroughfare for a meal he did not know would be his last. "Ho, Kano!" Jaga cleared his throat and sat erect. "Guard this road with your life. Our very future hinges on your master's sacrifice. If you love him, stay to this task. I stay to mine!"

Then with great urgency, Jaga sped off toward the Lair, the shadow of his craft passing over a pair of Mutants, and a young Lord lost in time and space. Quivering above, the stars grew faint again behind a

thickening ceiling of fumes, russet ghosts rising from the ruin. Looking down, Jaga noted the platforms of unready ships being hurriedly fueled and equipped for departure. Scores of emigrants stood eager to board them, their belongings forced into bulging armloads, their children swaying in drowsy stupor.

On the western horizon, swarms of lights streaked upward in concert through the clouds. Like flaring stars they gleamed silver and gold, and then all white hot as they rose out of sight to follow the other escaping fleets. In this sight Jaga took solace, knowing that his countrymen were escaping, and that with good fortune they would all be together again in a short while.

Soon Jaga passed over the royal courtyard and descended hastily into the Lair's open hangar. Awaiting Jaga's return, Panthro leaned against the hangar doorway as another quake rattled the very foundations of the Lair. Once the tremor had passed, he ran up to Jaga's ThunderClaw. In this gravest dusk, even the mighty Panthro panted with anxious fatigue.

"The Flagship and her convoy are prepared, my Lord," said Panthro. "They await the ThunderCats only."

Jaga's face hung stern and sad. "Liono is your Lord," he said forcefully. "You know no other."

"Yes, Jaga."

"Where are Tygra and Cheetara?"

"Cheetara is readying our transport at the western exit," replied Panthro, gesturing toward the rear of the Lair. "And Tygra is tinkering with that blasted optocrystal of his."

"And the Lord of the ThunderCats?" asked Jaga.

Panthro paused, and then it clicked. "He and the Kittens are with Tygra, Jaga."

"Very well," said Jaga. "Go with the others and await me at the western hangar. I have one final errand." Panthro nodded slowly, eyeing Jaga with a certain degree of unease; for he did not understand what errand might demand such urgency, nor did he foresee his eventual and crucial role.

And so once he and Panthro had separated, Jaga made his way into the occult depths of the Lair where the Casket resided, determined to fulfill Claudus' final wish that would revive hope in Thundera's dismal future. Jaga soon reached the Treasure Hall, where decades before he had defeated Ratilla the Terrible. There the Casket rested, and the Book within; but Jaga did not climb the stair just yet.

To the left there was another door, and it led to a secret chamber behind the dais. This chamber Jaga entered, only to be bathed in cold shafts of shimmering white light like cords and fans of silver ice. From his belt, Jaga pulled the mystic Sword of Omens; and the Eye of Thundera awoke in a crimson fury, driving back the argent beams. This was the Portal Room, unused for more than twelve years: the Lair gateway to Thundera's four Silver Halls.

For long ago, at the end of the Great Migration, the ancients erected four sacred altars, binding Thundera to ancient traditions too old to recall; and in each altar was set up a Silver Portal, so that pilgrims and clerics could easily travel between them for rites of worship. Jaga now stood before the Lair's Portal, awoken once more by the presence of the Sword; and with the Eye ablaze, he stepped into the midst of the light and vanished.

The first altar stood on the Isle of Ankerau in the center of Lake Serama. It was morning here, though the sunlight was enshrouded in mist and ash vomited from the broken continent of Feliera. The seas and receding rivers simmered, and the blackening trees screamed in dying anguish. Yet amidst the ongoing eruptions of fire and rock, there suddenly sprang a surge of white light from Ankerau's shore. There, at the sacred marina, the Silver Portal opened.

As the glow faded, Jaga's eyes adjusted to the hazy mayhem at Feliera. The lake was nothing more than a bed of caking mud, dotted with boiled fish and tortoises. The forests were burning, and the animals in panic fled to Serama for the safety of its waters; but they found none, and they wallowed in the mud and dried reeds. Writhing in the heat, they waited for doom to take them. Yet Jaga could do nothing for them, and he looked to his errand. There at the marina, the sacred barge remained unscathed; and from it Jaga seized the golden oar. Then he turned back into the portal and held the Sword of Omens aloft. Soon the silver light enveloped him once more, and he shielded his eyes, looking nevermore on that sacred lakebed.

And so in turn, Jaga traveled to the Pools of Iris and the Young Wood, where the ancient flag still fluttered with never-ending spirit. The flag he seized. And then he took the portal to the Gardens of Thundera high in the crumbling mountains, where the sturdy tiles of the first age still lined the fountains and the flowerbeds that smoldered. One tile he removed. And finally Jaga took the portal to the icy north, where high over dying reefs the Gemlight of the Basol Signal Tower still shone its wide beacon across the desert to the south. That gem he took. And when Jaga had collected these four articles, he returned to the Lair Portal Room with all speed, having looked his last upon the four wondrous corners of his home.

Exiting the hidden chamber, Jaga climbed the stair; and setting down the four artifacts he opened the great Casket. As Claudus had ordered, he removed the Book of Omens and held the Sword of Omens to his face. The Eye of Thundera glowed an uncharacteristic blue, and in this radiance the Book opened willfully. A vigorous quake ripped through the Lair unexpectedly, but Jaga did not flinch. The Book slowly rose from Jaga's palm and hovered above the Casket, its opened pages richly dark like wells of space and time.

Suddenly, the engraving on the wall behind the Casket burst to life; and within its silver halo the bejeweled cat's eye erupted into golden flame. Again, Jaga did not recoil, for he knew the Guardian and addressed him by name.

"Nebulex!" he cried. "I, Jaga the Wise, beseech you aid this dying planet. I ask that these four sacred relics of her splendor be locked within the timeless Book of Omens, that a New Thundera might spring fair and hopeful from some future rubble! I ask that you do this, for the sake of probity!"

"What is this?" spoke the Guardian. "A ThunderCat beseeches me? A ThunderCat, whose Lord has forsaken the Light? A ThunderCat who himself has turned his heart away from Love and Love's Daughter?"

"Forgive me!" cried Jaga. "Forgive my selfishness, my youthful rebellion. But know that this day, today of all days, I am guided by Love and Love alone. It is out of love that I ask for your aid!"

"I cannot aid you in this hour, Jaga the Wise," replied the Guardian. "Thundera crumbles beneath your feet, her doom just another tally in the angry contest between Good and Evil. The echo of her destruction is fated. Evil wins this day."

"But a New Thundera has been foreseen!" cried Jaga. "Both Resar♦s and Liono have seen Thundera's reformation, under the shadow of PlunDarr's wicked Moons. There must still be time to avoid such Evil."

"Is it absolution from your sin that you seek, Jaga? Here at the twenty-fourth hour you wish to repair your mistake?"

This question took Jaga by surprise. "Mistake? What mistake? What sin?" Within his chest he felt his heart leap with a new fierceness, blood coursing with an anxious rhythm and a fluttering through his core.

"The Sword of PlunDarr seeks vengeance, Jaga." Nebulex' voice was flat. Blunt. And Jaga's breath halted in stark understanding. "Like the embers in shadow, it lay in waiting; and now it unleashes its fiery storm upon us, sending our haven..."

"...to its grave." Jaga sank to his knees and shut his eyes. And for all the heat around him, an overwhelming cold seemed to replace it. Sweat ran clammy and the stirring in his stomach froze to an ever-tightening clench. He could not bear it, and yet he could not help but believe it.

"You say that Love has guided you here." Nebulex' voice broke the icy air. "And like Love you are compelled by Hope." The truth in the words brought warmth to Jaga's ears, and his tears fell hot and unrestrained. "If you are as hopeful as you say, then one choice lies before you still. The Book of Omens may shelter this hope, and carve it into prophecy, if you bind your spirit to it. Forsake the fire of your life, Jaga, and forge a Key."

Jaga understood. Within his soul burned an unquenchable flame, a source of immortal life beyond the frontier of time. Part of that flame had forged the Sword of Omens; the rest would forge this Key to Thundera's only hope. Only a lock crafted from the potent fire of life could guarantee that hope, for souls live unbound to consciousness or prophecy. In separating soul from earthly mind, destiny dissolves, and dreams can be etched into fate.

Jaga rose to his feet. "I forsake it," he whispered. Whether the flame remained or not, a new emptiness had already consumed him.

“So shall the Key to Thundera’s secrets spring from your eternal fire,” proclaimed Nebulex. “The Key of Thundera: the Key to the Book of Omens and to these secret remnants of Thundera’s hope.” As the Guardian spoke, the four artifacts took flight and disappeared into the vast pages of the Book of Omens: the Oar, the Tile, the Flag, and the Gemlight. The Book then closed, lowering itself into the Casket; and the Eye of Thundera ceased its blue glow.

Then Jaga’s insignia shone with a white fire, and he shrank back as his life was withdrawn by force. Countless threads of light pulled themselves from Jaga’s chest, as the leaves of a flower are peeled from the stem. When the light dimmed and Jaga stood upright once more, he saw that the glimmering threads of his immortal flame had woven themselves into a metal Key, branded with an insignia of its own. The Book of Omens, rising from the Casket, was now clasped shut; and across the clasp were set archaic symbols, etched on white keys and about the gilded edges.

“The Book of Omens is now locked,” said Nebulex, “and only the Key of Thundera can unlock the ThunderCats’ secrets that you have stored within it. When the time comes, the secrets will be revealed to whomever you entrust with the Key, for he alone shall comprehend the symbols of the clasp.

“The Casket and the Treasure are necessary as well: for as they are present here at the breaking, so must they be at the mending. The New Thundera will only survive if the ThunderCats present the secret relics at the appointed hour, with the Treasure assembled as it is now: the Chain, the Totem, the Mirror, the Bracelet, the Flute, and the Dragon. Clearly there is great risk involved; yet such is the nature of your hopeful deed, for you have risked their doom in the making of your own.”

“What about me?” Jaga asked, catching his reflection in Book’s cover. His uniform was no longer snug, and even his deepest breath felt shallow. His face now pale bore whiskers for the first time in centuries, and his youthful mane had all but disappeared. What remained was thin and white. A ghost.

“The echo we have cast reverberates backward through time, as it did when we forged the Sword. Your new appearance will go unnoticed. Both the Sword and this Key shall be bound to the Book of Omens by your spirit, Jaga. So long as this sacred triangle exists, you will be allowed conference beyond the Astral World to guide the ThunderCats as you may.” The Astral World. A ghost.

Suddenly, the foundations of the Lair began to rock and hiss, and the Key and Book clattered to the ground. Jaga quickly picked them up and placed them alongside one another in the Casket, which he pulled shut. Just as he closed it, beneath him the dais split apart, and the stair began to collapse. Losing his footing, Jaga tumbled to the ground amidst the fragmented steps. He landed on his back and was silent.

It was the Eye of Thundera that brought Jaga back to his senses moments later, growling in warning. He brought the curling crossbars to his eyes as he rose to his feet, commanding the Eye open. “Sword of Omens, give me Sight Beyond Sight.” Through the Sword, Jaga saw Liono, the young Lord of the ThunderCats, stumbling through the ailing Lair. He appeared lost and frightened, and the other ThunderCats were nowhere nearby.

Lowering the Sword, Jaga looked up, where the Casket remained perched twenty feet above him on the fractured dais. A heap of heavy rock had covered it; and without the stair, it was out of reach. It would take too long to retrieve. The Sword growled again, louder even than the echoes of the Guardian, who called to Jaga from above. Yet Jaga was decided.

"I must go, Nebulex," he cried. "My young Lord is in danger, and I have sworn to protect him. I must go."

"You cannot go," replied the Guardian. "The Book is locked, but you must take the Casket with you. You have given your life for this final chance. Why would you jeopardize it now?"

"Because there is no time," Jaga answered, already making his way out of the rubble. "I gave my word to Claudus, who trusted in nothing and no one but me. Liono must live. I will not fail him." Sheathing the Sword of Omens, Jaga reached clear ground and began to run from the Treasure Hall with all the speed he could muster. But the Guardian's voice echoed behind him.

"Then if you abandon the Casket, it shall likely perish with Thundera. The Treasure will scatter, and the Book will be unlocked by whosoever finds the Key."

"So you have said," called Jaga as he ran, "and so it shall be. I trust in the Eye of Thundera, and in the fortune that follows my race. I trust to hope, which has never failed me. And I trust that today's Evil is not forever." Behind Jaga, the lofty pillars lining the Treasure Hall all began to crumble; and what was left of the dais cracked and collapsed, trapping the Casket deep beneath a pile of boulders.

Dodging great blocks of stone that continued to tumble from above, Jaga made his way to the Lair's central hall. The Sword had shown Liono to be in or near this long hall, but there was no longer any sign of him. Torrents of falling stone and mortar had sealed off entire wings, and Jaga feared that he had come too late. Clearly and frantically, he called out for the young Lord.

"Liono! Where are you? Liono!" As he bellowed over the rumbles of the heaving planet, Jaga stumbled forward. More fierce tremors racked the Lair. The floor was beginning to crack, and the Eye of Thundera growled in agony.

Suddenly, Jaga espied a figure emerging from the shelter of a doorway at the hall's end. The figure's voice cried out, "I... I'm here, Jaga! Over here!" Jaga breathed a short sigh of relief when he heard Liono's high voice ring out, and he began scrambling over the debris that separated them. But as Liono called out, a nearby pillar swayed this way and that, sliding apart as it fell in the young Lord's direction. Jaga feared he would be too late.

It was Panthro whose quick reflexes caught the cylinder of rock before it struck the young Lord. He eyed Jaga, comforted that the old ThunderCat's errand had ended. The other ThunderCats soon came up behind him. They were all together; and with time short and the Lair falling to pieces, together they would make a final dash for the western exit.

“Come, Liono,” said Jaga. “We must get away while we still can!”

The young Lord looked up at Jaga with wide eyes. “Get away?” he questioned. “But, my home, Jaga...” Upon his brow glistened a layer of sweat, for Thundera’s fever worsened as she neared her end; and on his cheeks snaked fearful tears.

“We must seek a new home, Liono,” explained Jaga, putting a hand to the cub’s cheek. He wiped away the teardrops and inhaled sharply. “Be brave, my young Lord,” he said. “Thundera is no more.” Then he looked to the other ThunderCats, and at Panthro who held Tygra’s optocrystal Time Capsule close to his chest. “Come, my noble friends,” cried Jaga. “We cross into the unknown with rekindled hope our only guide. Yet our Code lives on in trust and faith. Away! By all true faith, away! ThunderCats...”

“Ho!” Their collective cry resounded to combat the dying groans of Thundera, whose fires thrashed with nightmare ferocity. And as they ran, their Lair collapsed about them with every step. Thundera bellowed and ripped, swallowing rock into molten rock and black ash into black pits. Jets of fire leapt across the planet in mile-high flares, gushing as from mortal wounds. Deep beneath the running feet of the ThunderCats, the Sword of PlunDarr raged against its molten prison; for it ached to destroy Thundera and finally have its revenge upon Jaga the Wise. But Jaga was already broken.