What the Chain by Chiauve

Chapter 2: Out of the Nest

"Be careful with him, Tygra, snarf!"

"I *am*!" Tygra retorted shortly. Did Snarf think that Tygra's goal was to single handedly end the Lion-O line or something? He bounced the kitten on his knee gently, smiling when the little lion cub burbled with joy.

"He's so cute," Cheetara said, leaning over Tygra's shoulder. She had only received her clan name a few months prior, and Tygra briefly wondered what her name had been. That was a line of thinking that had to stop; she was not of his clan and her name was none of his business regardless.

The miniature Lion-O mewed and reached for Tygra's nose, but he turned his head slightly and evaded the paws. He couldn't wait until this little guy was older, when he would be following Tygra around as he had once Panthro. Speaking of…

"Here, let me see him."

Tygra passed Lion-O, laughing as mightily as one his size could, to Panthro's big hands. The Panther's smile nearly split his face.

"Hey there, little guy!" Panthro then proceeded to make a series of bizarre faces which left Lion-O's eyes wide and somewhat horrified. He proceeded to cry. "Whoops, guess not."

Leora laughed and gestured for her son. Panthro gave her an apologetic smile and returned the wailing babe.

"He's just hungry," the Lady of the Thundercats explained, "Snarf, would you please show our guests back to the hall?"

Snarf chirred in worry. "Don't you need help?"

"Not as yet, good Snarf. You're time will come."

"Oh, alright." He cast one last longing look at the cub before he began to lead the young Thundercats out. The three stood and bowed politely to their host.

"Thank you, Lady Lion-O," Tygra said as the three left. They had all seen the newest Lion-O at the great ball celebrating his birth, and what a night that had been! But they hadn't had a chance to hold and see their future lord up close and were grateful when Lord Lion-O had invited them to his quarters to see the babe.

"Can you believe it," Cheetara said over her shoulder as the three hurried after Snarf.

“What?” Panthro asked.

“That that little cub will one day be bossing us around! Our future Lord of the Thundercats is no bigger than a loaf of bread!”

The three laughed and, to Snarf’s chagrin, scurried past him to get to the main hall on their own, eventually racing each other. Cheetara beat them easily and they ran into the main hall only to immediately quiet as they received sharp glares from several adults.

“Well then,” Tygra panted, “I guess it’s up to us to raise him right!”

They agreed with a unified “Ho!”

“No, no, Snarfus, the one on the left!”

The brown and grey Snarf glowered down at the young noble, shifting on the bookshelf to reach a particularly large tome. “It’s always the heavy ones with you, shnerf…”

Tygra grinned. “They’re the ones with the good info! C’mon Snarfus, I can get it.”

“And let you mess up my perfect organization system? Shnerf! No no…”

Lifting an arched brow, Tygra shook his head. Honestly, he had never figured out Snarfus’ ‘perfect system’ and began to doubt he had one. His uncle Karan sure thought so. Still, the old snarf knew the library better than anyone and kept it well ordered. And by old snarf he meant ancient, his grandmother had hired him as a young ‘cat, by Thundera. The idea of Snarfus hauling that heavy book down himself was unacceptable to Tygra and he reached up for it. With a surrendering “shnerf” Snarfus shoved it off the shelf. Too late both he and Tygra realized the mistake and Tygra shut his eyes against the inevitable skull crushing.

“Whoa! Steady, Cousin!”

Tygra looked up to see the large book suspended in the claw of his elder cousin, the son of his aunt Sophia.

“Thank you, Tassos,” he said, a sheepish smile on his face.

Tassos smirked and turned his false ire on the old snarf. “Snarfus! Are you trying to kill the future head of Tygra clan? How horrible!”

Snarfus glowered and hopped down to the floor. “I would do no such thing, shnerf. An accident, a miscalculation.”

“Nope, I smell conspiracy.”

Snarfus narrowed his eyes and marched away from the two, tail raised and shnerfing all the way. Leave it to their grandmother to find the one snarf without a sense of humor.

“And you,” Tassos said, wagging the tome at Tygra, “if the book’s bigger than you head, leave it alone.”

“I don’t think my head’s getting much bigger, Cousin,” Tygra sighed in annoyance. He loved his cousin dearly, but he suspected he’d never be more than a kitten in Tassos’ eyes.

“Really? With all the things you stuff in there? Impossible!” Tassos surrendered the book, and Tygra tucked it under his arm. “Anyway, I came to tell you that Uncle Cleatus wants to talk to you. But it took me a while to find you, so you’d better hurry.”

Tygra’s eyes widened and he ran out of the library so fast Tassos could have sworn he left some stripes behind. But not so fast as to be missed by Snarfus.

“And bring that back when you’re done this time, shnerf!”

Cleatus nearly jumped in his chair when his son suddenly appeared in his office, panting and with a heavy book under his arm.

“Well,” he coughed guiltily, resting his arms on his desk, “it wasn’t *that* important.” Leave it to his nephew…

Tygra caught his breath and stood straight. “You wanted to see me, Father?”

“Yes.” Cleatus gestured absently to the book under Tygra’s arm, and the young tiger set it in a spare chair. But Cleatus remained silent, watching his son over steepled fingers and Tygra shifted under his gaze.

Tygra was a good son and an intelligent Thundercat. Edeline, who had been guiding his developing mental powers herself, had been happily reporting his skills growing by leaps and bounds, though he did have a tendency to ignore her warnings and try himself on his own now and again. But what else could he expect from a young ‘cat? Still, he was hoping his son would heed Edeline’s word and not blow his brain out or something.

His son had one notable flaw that was common among the clan. Tygras were known for their solitary tendencies, often preferring to solve problems on their own. Many a Tygra had been lost for this, and so teamwork had been stressed in Thundercat training well over a century now. Oh, Tygra worked well with his fellow young nobles and spent quite a bit of time with them. But therein lay the problem. Too much time.

Segregation was a problem found only among the noble clans since the unification of Thundera. They got along well with each other, indeed, but had begun to realize a gap had formed between

them and their Thunderian countrymen. When the current Lord Lion-O had taken the throne, his first act was to remedy this by encouraging the noble clans to reach out to the lesser clans and establish relationships, especially outside of the already formed noble and sub-clan relationship. Noble kittens received their Thundercat training and initial schooling in Cats Lair, but afterwards were sent to the schools shared by all cats in the city to learn alongside their countrymen. The children would repair the bridges their forbearers let fall into decay.

Cleatus realized he had been lax in this directive with Tygra. For reasons he could no longer remember, he had hesitated placing Tygra into school with fellows his age. Maybe he felt the training he was receiving now was enough, or maybe he figured Tygra was smart enough to continue schooling himself now. Or, more likely, he just couldn't let his only son go yet.

Well, enough. He was damning the boy.

Tygra was social enough in his own circles, but displayed a shyness among unknown adults or visiting youths. Aside from his former excursions with Bali-O or travels with Tassos to the frontier, he had hardly been outside the estates or Cats Lair. He was sheltered, and that would leave him susceptible to outside pressures later on. Cleatus could not allow that. But a new school cycle did not begin again until next season.

Yet there was no better time than the present to start shoving the bird out of the nest, was there?

"I need you to go to the west side of the city to the Siberim clan. You will meet with Siberim and he will take you with him to the quarry outside the Blue Forest. Leopara should be there. The quarry is on standby while she confirms possible ruins in the cliffs left by our ancestors."

Tygra looked confused. "Me?"

"Yes. Siberim will get Leopara's results. He would normally bring them to me himself but I think I'll save him a trip and you can bring them instead."

Tygra was still dumbfounded. "Me?"

Cleatus narrowed his eyes. "Yes, you. I thought you liked history?"

"I do but… Why me?"

"Why not? You will soon lead Tygra clan, and those of our sub-clans. Bali-O is gone to lead her clan, you know that. It's time for you to take her place." Cleatus leaned forward, unhappy with his son's reluctance. "Well?"

"Y-yes sir." Tygra nodded respectfully and hurried out of the office.

Siberim was a large Thunderian. Tygra had to crane his neck back just to look at him. Wow, and his mother thought *he* had wild hair. Siberim's mane was longer than most Tygra males, and the pale fur on the back of his neck and elbows was longer than normal as well. He knew the general appearances of all the sub-clans academically, but he'd yet to see them all in person. Siberim looked like a bad cross between a Tygra and an Ounceo. Tygra tried not to laugh.

Siberim caught the suppressed look and smirked. "Well, you look funny to me too, young Tygra." When Tygra had the grace to look ashamed at his thoughts, Siberim leaned close and whispered conspiratorially, "Ever seen a Jagarundya? There's one silly looking cat!"

Tygra managed a smile and tried to relax, but the close proximity of a stranger, sub-clansman or not, was making him nervous. Still, he would do as his father commanded.

The flight was a long one, for while the ship was a fast, it was small and could only hold so much fuel. Siberim would not unnecessarily burn it to push the engines for a shorter trip. Tygra passed the time asking about the Siberim clan and then the events at the quarry. It was a relatively new quarry and not much stone had been removed when an odd system of caves was uncovered. Quite curious since initial scans had shown no such thing. A few of the diggers thought they had found signs of previous habitation and a team of archaeologists were called out to investigate. An unknown site of ruins could be important for Thunderan history, but there was also the question of how they caves had remained hidden.

Leopara was there to meet them when the aircraft landed. She wore no clothes save for a pair of heavy boots and a tool belt, allowing her ease of movement through small passages in the caves. Her long spotted hair was pulled back into a tight bun. By her side stood a middle-aged female snarf whom Tygra recognized but could not recall the name.

Like other Thunderians, snarfs preferred to keep their real names to themselves and use variations of the Snarf name, but Tygra could not remember even what that was. He had Tassos to blame for that. Too late, the snarf recognized him.

"Well well, snarf, it's the little Tygra cousin! I didn't expect that!"

"Good to see you too…uh…Snarfette." He flinched, expecting her to be angry with him for referring to her by that silly pet name, though it wasn't the worst one he'd heard. Siberim and Leopara certainly looked taken aback.

Snarfette only laughed. She turned to Leopara and explained, "I often work with this one's cousin out on the sites at the frontier. Snarf! Sometimes Tygra brings his little cousin here along, he does like the old buildings, snarf."

Like many of the Tygra clan, Tassos had dedicated his studies to history, more specifically, ancient cooking, of all things. The ruins of the frontier had many well-preserved cellars and what were currently believed to be communal kitchens for him to sift through. Tassos often took Tygra with him to assist, and when Tygra wasn't helping he was free to observe the surviving structures. He loved studying their designs and make, to see what materials used survived for so

long and what did not, what types of spaces could withstand time. Kitchens and bathhouses, strangely enough. Wandering amongst those remote places, touching the walls of his ancestors, he felt better attuned to the histories he'd read so diligently.

But if he was assistant to Tassos, Tassos was in turn often the assistant to the so-named Snarfette. He had given her a few names during their time together and Tygra had the misfortune of hearing them all. Tassos would also call her "Snarfer-pie" or "Snarfa-babe," or even just flat out "Babe."

Tassos had always been the eccentric one.

"Well," Leopara cleared her throat and decided it was safer to get down to business. After a quick explanation from Siberim of Tygra's purpose, she and Snarfette led them to a partially caved-in entrance.

There were indeed signs of previous habitation in the caves, at two different times. Far within the caves where the levels dropped were some ancient burn pits, small bits of bone and pot sherds scattered about. Tygra stared in awe at some faded paintings on the cave walls. This was one of the oldest finds and could possibly shed some light on the forgotten pre-history of Thundera. Leopara then led them into a passage that was more elevated than the rest. The remains here were newer, more preserved and broken remnants of tools and small machines were attached to the walls.

"We think this place was where survivors of the Cataclysm took refuge. While this is a fantastic find, I think this is what you'll find interesting, Siberim," Leopara said and again led into another passage. There was no sign of habitation here, if anything, it looked recently dug up. The leopard brushed aside some dirt that had settled on where the wall had been chipped at and revealed a strange metallic ore.

"We think this is why the surveyors couldn't find the caves. From what we've observed, this mineral is found in a thin lair all through the rock. It seems to reflect our scans, making everything underneath practically invisible. It's possible our ancestors may have even fled here for this reason."

Siberim whistled in appreciation. Tygra had to agree with the sentiment.

"I'll definitely get more of my clansmen out here. This may even prove useful in the war with Plundarr."

Snarfette nodded in agreement. "Yes, but there is only the one layer of this mineral found here. We've already got people surveying for another strain, but that's not my job, snarf."

"Well, one thing's for certain, this quarry is finished." Siberim shook his head. Whiile the find was incredible on all levels, he would have to remove his people and begin surveys for a new site. The archaeologists would at least have a job for a while.

Tygra could not help but step forward and lightly brush his fingers on the strange new mineral. “May I have a sample of this to take back to my father? We could uncover its properties in full in our labs.”

“I already have a few samples for you to take back to Cats’ Lair, as well as a more complete report on a data plate.”

He nodded in thanks, rubbing the powdery residue between his fingers. Something that could naturally hide someone from scanners? What else could this miraculous mineral do?

Siberim had offered to drop Tygra off at his clan estates, but the young tiger declined. Siberim would have his hands full as it was, and Tygra could make it home on his own. The sun was past its zenith, but there was still plenty of daylight left and the city was usually busy until well after dark. Over his shoulder Tygra carried a satchel he had borrowed containing the mineral samples and the data plate.

Tygra was feeling pretty good. Despite his initial hesitations, he had enjoyed himself and was glad to have a chance to see the site first hand. He couldn’t wait to tell Panthro and Cheetara all about it. Boy would they be jealous!

He stopped at a public kiosk and started digging around for his ident plate to summon a transport. He was still digging through the satchel when it suddenly became dark. He stopped, his hand still in the bag. It was too early for darkness and it came much too quick. There were no eclipses due that he knew of.

He looked upwards in time with the sudden cries that echoed up and down the streets.

An enormous Plundarrian ship descended upon the city, blotting out the sun.