What the Chain by Chiauve

Chapter 5: The Perfect Weapon

The headphones were still too big, but at least they stayed on his head now. It wasn't that long ago that Tygra had to hold the things over his ears.

He sat at an empty console in the Cat's Head, tuned in on the frequency of the general broadcast from the academy. Except for some late shift staff, he had the normally busy room to himself. Cats' Lair was the hub of an extensive network of towers all over Thundera, allowing the Thundercats to monitor events all over the globe, but the analytical work of uncommon findings was done at the academy.

Usually Tygra listened in only on the public lecture channels. Most classes at the academy broadcast their lectures and discussions, allowing any who wished to listen in and learn. For Tygra, it wasn't enough. He couldn't wait until he was old enough to sit in those lecture halls, see the lesson and participate in the discussions as well as hear.

As Cheetara had promised, his general schooling had improved some. While it was due in part to the increasing difficulty of the curriculum, it was mostly Master Smilodos' doing, when he had pulled Tygra aside after lesson to discuss the first paper he had written for the class. A free write, he had stressed, not a new hypothesis on the date of the emergence of Thundercats among Thunderians that was well over the two page limit.

Tygra had scratched the back of his neck and said plaintively, "Well, that's what I did over break. My cousin's an archaeologist, you see and…"

"Tygra," Master Smilodos sighed, "let me tell you something. I have taught many young Thundercats in my classes, and there is one pattern I can see. To be a Thundercat, the best of all Thunderians, is a thing to be proud of. But those who have been happiest in my classes are those who, for a few hours in this room, pretend that they are commoners."

Tygra didn't know what to say to that.

The saber-toothed cat's soft look hardened a little. "However, I will not permit you to lower your standards. I can provide you with alternate assignments if you find it necessary, and if you truly find yourself unchallenged in this class, I can put in a petition for a waiver to place you in a class with older children. It's not uncommon with Thundercats."

Tygra had readily agreed, but later learned that, despite its common occurrence, he was probably not going to get that waiver. His parents forbid it, and his mother had stressed to him again the importance of socializing with kits his own age. If he needed extra education, he could study on his own time.

So here he was, dreaming of academy days to come. But when he'd first entered the Cat's Head, earlier in the evening, he had overheard discussions of strange data that had been sent to the academy and switched over to that channel. For the next few hours he listened to reports on random seismic activity in strange locations. In fact, the way they talked about it, it sounded as though it wasn't the first time it had been noticed…

Cleatus cleared his throat.

The headphones hit the console with a clatter as Tygra jumped, his fur standing on end. He spun around in the chair and found his father towering over him, a look on his face that, at that time, was indescribable. It wouldn't be until years later when Tygra would think back on it as the True Doom Gaze.

"Good evening, Father," Tygra said, regaining his composure.

"It was."

Oh, crap.

"It was the strangest thing," Cleatus continued, almost cordially, "I was in the middle of reading some highly important geographical reports when Nox asked me to come look at some security tapes. Seems one of the skycutters we captured and modified was found missing, and what do you suppose I see on that security tape?"

His father was on a roll, and the thunder would follow, it was best to stay quiet. Tygra's only hope was that there were others in the room and his father wouldn't punish him here. Tygra clan did not settle familial disputes in public.

"Nothing! It was very strange, the cutter just…disappeared. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?"

"Uh…"

Cleatus leaned close and lowered his voice, making him even more frightful in his seething anger. "Just because I don't possess the mind power doesn't mean I don't recognize it when I see its effects."

Tygra swallowed and stammered, "I- I wanted to practice flying, Sir. We brought it back…"

"Yes, you did, else do you think I would be just *talking* to you about it now?" Cleatus stood back again, letting his anger drain out, and then he caught Tygra's full words. "'We?' Who else was with you?"

Tygra placed the headphones back in its cradle, saying nothing. Cleatus did not appreciate that, but maintained his calm mien.

“I don’t need to ask, do I? I’ll talk to Nox about Panthro later, *after* I tell your mother about your little mind games.” He smirked at Tygra’s visible wince, Edeline’s anger was something even he feared at times, and she took her mind power very seriously.

In truth, Cleatus wasn’t angry anymore, and his initial anger had been reactionary. Tygra was still a boy, and Cleatus himself had done worse in his youth. Many of them quite funny, in hindsight. But discipline was needed, Tygra was young, yes, but old enough now to know better.

“You understand my disappointment, correct? Whatever your intentions, you took that modified skycutter without leave by way of deceit. Is that of the Code?”

“No, Sir.”

“No. It was also unnecessary, as you know there are small craft available for you kits.”

“They’re not any good…” Tygra muttered to himself. Practice craft, they were old and bore many marks of crashes by the inexperienced. They were harder to handle than any other craft he had known. His father shot him another stern glare at his comment.

“Anyway,” Cleatus swung himself so he could lean against the console. He noted that the minimal crew of Cat’s Head was pointedly ignoring them. “I’ll let your mother deal with your punishment, but for my part, you are to come straight to me after lessons for duty, and you are banned from the library for the time being.”

Tygra groaned, embellishing a little so that the punishment seemed greater than it was. It didn’t work.

“What else,” Cleatus pondered, “Wily is a busy man as of late, with two cubs to raise alone while still aiding his sister-in-law. I think it would be a good gesture on your part to help him out a few times a week, don’t you think?”

“Yessir.” Tygra’s groan was genuine this time. He was generally good with kittens, but the twins?

The problem with twins was that they could cry in stereo.

Panthro whirled in midair and struck downward. The staff hit the floor with a *clack!* missing its target. Tygra rolled and thrust his own staff upwards, letting gravity do the rest of the work as the panther came down. Despite his size, Panthro was quick and in one swift movement grabbed hold of the staff end and twisted it as he landed. Tygra either had to let go or get thrust to the ground. He chose the former and leapt for Panthro before he hit the floor.

And suddenly found he was the one on the floor.

“How…?”

“I win,” Panthro beamed. He stood, pulling Tygra up from where he pinned him. “I hate to say it, kiddo, but you’re really not the best at this.”

Tygra had grown some as of late and did not have to crane his neck back very far to meet Panthro’s eyes. “That’s not very constructive.”

“I’ve tried, Tygra. You don’t handle close combat well, so I thought the staff would work for you.”

“So you’re just saying I can’t fight?” Tygra was bruised in body and ego and the seemingly bald truth was more than he could bear. Panthro was as good a target for his frustration as anyone.

“I didn’t say that, you’re just not the best of us.”

“Now *that’s* helpful!” Tygra yelled, throwing his arms out. Panthro, angry, took a step towards him.

A staff swung down and rapped both cats on the head.

“That’s enough, you two,” Cheetara snapped, planting the staff beside her firmly.

The two young males gaped at her. Cheetara had joined their sessions a few weeks ago and ran circles around the two, both literally and figuratively.

“Sorry, Cheetara,” Tygra said, rubbing his head, “and I’m sorry, Panthro, you *have* been helping a great deal.”

“I think that’s it for today,” Panthro smiled, ruffling his younger friend’s mane, which Tygra quickly ducked out of, “We’re all wired up enough as it is.”

Cheetara gathered the staves, but did not take them back to the rack, instead using them for support as she leaned in closer to her friends. “Tygra, what does your cousin do? He’s not one for close combat either, right?”

It took Tygra a moment to realize to which cousin she was referring, as she did not know his name. He was merely another Tygra.

“He learned martial arts under my father with me, Cheetara,” Panthro explained, “but he uses stealth to attack, not any long range weapon.”

While the Tygra clan was insistent on their policy to keep domestic disputes among themselves, the Panthro clan followed a different philosophy. Any familial disputes were brought to the clan’s attention and solved quickly as a whole, keeping the clan efficient and united. So many a Panthro found themselves the receptacle for a Tygra’s problems. Panthro didn’t mind, he just

found it kind of sad that he sometimes had a better idea of what was going on in the personal lives of the premier tiger clan better than most Tygra did. So he'd known a long time the contention between Tygra's cousin and his mother, and he knew the root of it.

Corydon, though Panthro did not know that was his name, had also inherited the rare mind power, though not as to the extent of Tygra or Edeline. The best he could do was to bend others' minds away from him, so that he seemed invisible among them. True invisibility was beyond him, but it was effective enough in battle. He worked well with his brother, letting him engage the enemy while Corydon would turn their minds from him and approach unseen from behind. He would then quickly dispatch of the enemy who never knew he was there. His mother thought this tactic not of the Code, if not downright cowardly.

Regardless, Cheetara had a point. Perhaps there was another method Tygra could excel at.

The panther shrugged. "I still think you just need to find the right weapon, Tygra. These just don't suit you, or me, to be honest." Panthro was a skilled fighter with just about any weapon in his hand, but he had yet to find the one weapon he could call his own.

"Well, I don't know what you two are complaining about. This," she ran her hand up one of the staves, "feels just right." Cheetara smiled brightly, and Tygra noticed how pretty it was. While she was younger than he, like most females her age, she was already surpassing him in height and other, more lovely, developments.

He swallowed. "It is something to think about, Panthro, Cheetara. Thank you."

Karan, as the eldest sibling after Cleatus, had always stayed close to his brother over the years. It was his duty to aide the head of his clan in all matters, should the unthinkable happen and he had to replace Cleatus before Tygra came of age. Those years before Tygra's birth had left him with a gnawing fear in his gut. What if Cleatus did not produce an heir? What if Karan had to take control of the clan? It was not a thought he relished, but neither one he could escape. He breathed a very big sigh of relief the day Theron-now-Tygra was born.

But there was one duty he enjoyed above all others: the tedious work of inventorying the antiquities stored in the vault underneath the estates. He was an avid historian, and touching the old relics, naming them and recording their histories was a pleasant task that always placed him at ease. Items were categorized and placed in one of the many rooms with others of its kind. Some rooms were organized by age, others by type. Sometimes, he liked to frustrate his colleagues by switching them up. While one himself, he found historians generally dull and nothing was more amusing than their cries of annoyance when they found all the relics had been rearranged *again*.

He was, in fact, doing just that when he saw Tygra wander by, slowly perusing the doors as he looked for something. Karan blinked, his yellowish eyes made huge through the curved glass of

his spectacles. Tygra didn't come down here often, and Karan found himself more than a little curious.

"Nephew," he called, stepping out of the cluttered room of scrolls that would soon be scattered about the vault, arranged by author.

Tygra turned and smiled. "Afternoon, Uncle Karan. Rearranging again? You know how cousin Alexander hates that."

Alexander wasn't Tygra's cousin so much as Karan's, but following the winding paths of kinship was his wife's job and titles were a bore.

"All the better! It'll be some time before I finish so what are you looking for? I'll get it for you."

"I don't know, Uncle. I was just wanting to look at our old weapons, if I could. They're still all in one place, right?"

Karan's arched brows shot up. Weapons? When Tygra did come down to the vault it was usually for old books dating pre-Cataclysm. "They should be, I only put them all there last week. Why?"

Tygra shrugged with an innocent little boy smile that he couldn't pull off as well as he used to. "You know me, just research."

"Hm." Karan led his nephew to one of the largest room in the vault. The Tygra had an extensive collection of ancient arms, a reminder of their violent past. Most in the collection were from the era of the Cataclysm, the most recent of violent cycles Thundera had suffered through, though a few predated even that. He stood among them, blades, spears, old firearms, more recent but obsolete laser weaponry, staves, and others, hanging upon the walls or sealed behind glass. Tygra slowly circled the room, looking at each one in turn, as though something would cry out to him 'I am the one!' This was stupid, he was grasping at straws, and yet he kept looking.

Karan leaned against the doorframe, watching with interest. It finally dawned on him, and he nearly laughed.

"I was always partial to the slingshot," he said, "before my sight got bad."

"I'm a little too old for that now."

"In the right hands, it's not a child's toy, Nephew."

Tygra nodded apologetically and kept looking. He stopped at a glass case containing smaller weapons dated post-Cataclysm. Amazingly, something had indeed cried out to him.

"Karan, may I see this one?"

His uncle leaned over his shoulder, squinting despite his spectacles. “That? We don’t use those anymore, Tygra. Took a lot of skill to use them, and well…”

“I’d still like to look.”

“Suit yourself.” He flipped open a keypad at the far side of the case and tapped in a code. The glass before Tygra shimmered and vanished. “Go ahead. It’s old, but still in decent condition. Those were used right after the Cataclysm, when Thunderians were still recovering from the disasters.”

Tygra pulled it out, and the glass reappeared. It was indeed old, it’s color faded and it was cracked in some parts of the handle. It fit easily in his hand, well balanced and, somehow, still thrumming with faint power begging to be released. His thumb ran over a worn ball of wood and bone, and he briefly wondered whose it was. A thought that was forgotten as, without preamble, he flung his arm outward.

The bolas lashed outward, impossibly long and arching in a graceful line from the handle. From the corner of his eye he could see Karan step forward in alarm as he too realized the dangerous balls were heading straight towards another case against the far wall. With a cry, he threw his arm back and, as though reading his thoughts, the bolas snapped backwards, flying back into the handle with a most beautiful clap.

Tygra stood there, trapped in that pose while his uncle stood stunned behind him.

“Well,” Karan finally said with a cough, “that was…”

“Perfect.”

“I guess so. I’d recommend fixing it up a bit before you go using it, though. It is in good shape, but it won’t last through anything strenuous. And it’ll take a lot of practice, something like that.”

“What?” Tygra gasped, “Take it? I can’t, it belongs here!”

“To do what? Rot? You said so yourself, Tygra, it’s perfect.” He sighed and placed a hand on his nephew’s shoulder. “That once belonged to one of our clansmen, do them honor in it.”

Tygra nodded, and clasped the bolas to his heart.

It was many days later and Tygra still seemed to do more damage to himself with the bolas than any of his targets. It was different than any other weapon he’d handled and was taking some getting used to. But it was an elegant one, and a pleasure to wield, despite his bruises.

He’d just managed to get himself wound up in it again when he noticed his mother watching him. She smiled and approached, pulling his bound arm loose so he could free himself.

“I couldn’t believe it when Karan told me, but here you are. And you seem to be enjoying yourself.”

“More so when I actually hit something that isn’t me.”

She laughed. “My poor son. I am proud of you, though I was a little surprised. A bolas?”

“Why is that so strange?”

“Well, it is a woman’s weapon.”

Tygra stared at her blankly a moment, but all that he could say was, “Oh.”

Edeline shook her head and added, “Not traditionally, of course. Thunderians used bolas to hunt ages ago, but that kind, the whip, was used by women after the Cataclysm. Things were not as they are now.”

“I know. The population was so low after the disasters that women were not permitted to hunt or go into battle. They remained behind to care for the family.”

“Yes, but they also had to defend it, if they must. The whip was a weapon, but used correctly it was beautiful to use and was often an art in itself. Oh don’t look like that, Tygra, those days are gone.”

“Yes,” Tygra nodded. “But it is still obsolete, I was thinking Panthro and I could update it a little.”

“I’d focus more on your form for now than adding bells and whistles. But right now,” Edeline’s voice pitched upward to a devilish tone, “I believe there is a pair of adorable twins who can’t wait to see you. Off you go!”

Tygra groaned and retracted the whip. “You are cruel, Mother.”

“Not as cruel as those two when they’re late to be fed. I’d hurry if I was you.”

With a perfect teenaged pout, Tygra shuffled out of the bay to an evening of hair pulling and food throwing. And kitten food was nigh impossible to get out of his fur.