What the Chain by Chiauve

Chapter 6: Sun and Earth

Titania glared at her brother in as much disgust as a three-year-old could muster. The fall hadn't been that bad, but Thom was still sitting there sniffling to himself, hands on his scraped knee.

"Stop being a baby," she insisted, hands on her hips in a way she'd seen many adults use.

"I'm not," he sniffed again, but his trembling lip revealed him and he whimpered. It was the sight of the blood that had really got him, seemingly enhancing the pain. Maybe this hadn't been the best idea after all.

"Baby!" Titania had wanted to go outside all day, and as soon as their babysitter's back was turned, she and Thomas had fled the nursery and found their way to the courtyard. They'd been hurrying to the lawn to play when Thomas tripped on the short marble stairway and now he wouldn't stop crying. She was trying to make him angry, to get up and chase her, and then he would forget and they could play. But the taunting only upset him and he cried more. She sighed and sat next to her twin, one arm around his shoulder, and wait for him to finish.

"What's going on here?"

Titania and Thomas looked up to see Tygra approaching from across the lawn. He clearly had just come from training, wearing nothing but his training belt and boots and sweat matting his now short-cropped mane.

Titania stood and quickly began to explain, cramming as much information in one sentence as she could. "We were just coming outside to play Tygra nobody said we couldn't and then Thom-"

"Wilykat," Tygra corrected.

"Wilykat fell and now he won't stop crying and I was just trying to get him to stop but he wouldn't."

Tygra nodded and knelt in front of Thom, he was at his full height now, and towered above them otherwise. While Thom had stopped crying outright, he gave Tygra such a pitiful look, his hands still clasped over his knee, that the tiger had to stifle a laugh.

"Let me see," he said. At sixteen, his voice was no longer that of a soft-spoken boy, but had deepened into a bold tenor akin to his father's. "It's not so bad, Kat. There's not a lot of blood and it should scab fine. Not even a scar."

Thomas just sniffed and nodded.

“Come on, then, let’s get you two back to the nursery and I’ll clean that just in case.”

Wilykat held out his arms, expecting to be carried. Tygra obliged and lifted him so he could wrap his small arms around his neck and walked back into Cats’ Lair, Wilykit grabbing hold of his free hand. He had ceased to be their designated babysitter some time ago, but they knew him and their trust was explicit.

Kit and Kat. They were common nicknames for twins or brother and sisters who were close in age, making the use of clan names confusing. Even he’d been the recipient of the name Kat a few times in his childhood, and he had no siblings. Just far too many cousins. But the kittens were still just learning such things, Kit’s slip earlier was proof of that. Was this not the age any young cub began to discover the sense of self anyway? He couldn’t remember. He only knew the first time someone did call him Kat he had looked behind him for another boy that didn’t exist.

They hadn’t made it too far into the lair when a young Wily, not much older than Tygra had been when he’d been assigned to the twins, came running down the hall towards them.

“There you are!” she cried, “I’ve been looking all over…” Wily didn’t finished just stopped before Tygra, breathing heavily as if she had been running, “by Jaga.”

Swearing by Jaga was common, though no one was sure if it was by an individual or the clan as a whole. The Jaga clan was one of the oldest, established even as far back as the Great Migration. According to legends, it was Jaga who found the planet Thundera for their ancient peoples to settle, and that clan, which had survived three Cataclysms and the unknowns that came before, who had always aided their mightiest lords when they existed. Jaga had been there when the first Lion-O ascended to the throne. Since then Thundera had prospered well into an era rivaling, if not surpassing, their mythical Golden Age that had come before Thundera, on a world long forgotten.

Tygra gave the young Wily a stern glare. “May I ask how these two managed to escape you?”

“I- I only turned my back for a moment…!” she choked out, fear in her eyes. Was he really that threatening? But she was just a child, and how many times had he managed to lose the twins, and they were barely crawling then! His annoyance changed to pity; the Wily clan had been named such for a reason. Tygra decided to turn the blame where it belonged.

“And why,” he looked down at Wilykit, now shyly hiding behind him, “did you two run off without her?”

“We wanted to go outside.”

“And you didn’t think to ask? Apologize to her.”

“Sorry, Aida…” both kits murmured automatically. Tygra stiffened.

“It’s alright,” their caretaker cut in before he could chastise them, “one should be willing to withstand a few breaches in etiquette when dealing with kittens, right?”

“Right,” he said. Not his philosophy, but he was no longer their babysitter and their education was no longer any of his business, if it ever had been.

“Come on, Kit, Kat, let’s go back to the nursery,” Wily said, extending her arms for Wilykat.

Tygra was about to tell her of Kat’s knee when a low rumble cut him off, followed by the ground beneath them beginning to shake. The lamps along the wall rattled and one tumbled to the floor. Kit clung to his leg while Kat whimpered and tightened his grip. A crack thundered down the hall and Tygra looked up to see spider web cracks shoot across the ceiling. Wily instinctively pulled Kit to her and sheltered the frightened kitten, but then all grew still.

“What in Thundera…!” Wily cried, looking about in wonder.

“What indeed,” Tygra muttered to himself. These strange tremors had been increasing as of late, and no one could explain why.

Cheetara gazed down at the ground far below and slapped the console in irritation.

“I could run there faster than this piece of junk.”

The old aerial transport groaned and rattled as though agreeing. Supposedly the machine had a long history and Panthro himself had maintained its upkeep. He’d taken it personally when Cheetara and Tygra had tried to talk him into letting them use one of the newer transports, so now they were stuck with it.

The snowcapped mountains before them glistened in the sunlight, rising up from an endless, lonely field of white. There were no cities out here, no farms or towns anywhere in sight. The only Thunderians that lived out in this wasteland were the reclusive Ounceo, hidden away in the looming mountain range. There was rarely a reason for Thundercats to come this far north in the mountains, but if the increasing earthquakes had anything good about them, it was the accidental reveal of a large vein of the miraculous mineral found years ago. Lord Lion-O wanted to mine the mineral, but the mountains had been the territory of the Ounceo since the Second Cataclysm and he wished to have their permission and aid before he sent any workers.

After the last Cataclysm, the first Lion-O, newly ascended to the throne of the unified Thunderans, had dreamed of bringing all clans into the circle, so all his countrymen, near or far, would have a voice in the Council if they so wished. He had believed his goal complete when ancient texts had referenced two as-yet discovered clans: an unnamed offshoot of the Leopara clan and the mighty Tigris clan.

When found, Lion-O himself had traveled to these mountains and extended his hand in friendship to the Ounceo. They had gladly accepted and joined the unified Thunderans. However, there were no Thundercats among them (it was widely believed that they were descendants of castoffs of the Leopara clan, though there was no proof of this) and they preferred their mountain home. Lion-O officially declared the territory theirs and they continued their reclusive lives, though it was becoming common that young Ounceo would leave their traditional lifestyles and move to nearby towns for work.

Cheetara had been chosen by Lion-O to travel to the northern mountains and request mining rights from the Ounceo elders. She was young, but Lion-O knew her intelligence as well as her compassion that would allow her to relate to the clan. Tygra had been surprised and very pleased when she chose him to accompany her.

He was flying now, giving her a break from the redundancy of steering when on autopilot. Cheetara leaned against the console, her head resting in her hand and a free finger twirling her spotted hair. Very alluring… She looked at him suddenly and smiled.

Tygra had to right the transport when his hand slipped on the control.

Contrary to popular urban belief, the Ounceo were not barbaric and cut off from the rest of the world. Granted, their communication systems were of old Snarf design, but they worked and anything the Ounceo needed could be sent to them. Cheetara landed the groaning transport on a landing pad not too far from the village and when they climbed out found a small crowd of snow leopards waiting for them.

Cheetara bowed and Tygra followed.

“Greetings, I am Cheetara, first in line to the Cheetara Clan and this is Tygra, heir to his clan.”

The Ounceo bowed in return and one, older than the others with him, stepped forward. “We welcome you with open arms, we do not get visitors often and are glad you are here. But come, there is a warm fire and food waiting for you.”

Both nobles bowed again and let the elder Ounceo guide them to the village. There was a biting wind blowing snow about them and a fire sounded glorious.

The Ounceo were unique in appearance. They lacked some of the traits found among clans that produced Thundercats; their ears were rounded and while there were spots on their long fur they had no facemasks. But strangely they retained one trait of the ancients even Thundercats no longer had: a tail. It was vestigial, short without any means of movement, but the fur was long and soft and the tail was often a mark of fashion. The elder Ounceo had multiple colored beads and shining metals decorating his, and many females Cheetara and Tygra passed had dyed beautiful, swirling designs onto theirs.

Rustic was the best way to describe the Ounceo village, Tygra thought, though he could see signs of modern comforts here and there, but no vehicles. They were cumbersome in the rocky terrain and so the Ounceo continued to prefer to travel on foot. They were reputed as one of the most sure-footed clans on Thundera and, looking down a steep cliff where he could see kittens playing, Tygra had to agree.

At the center of the village stood a large building, circular in shape and without windows, but smoke and a red glow could be seen escaping from an opening in the conical roof. Ounceo pulled aside a heavy drape of animal skin and gestured for Cheetara and Tygra to enter. A large fire pit lay in the center of the room, animal roasts rotating above it and filling the large space with delicious odors. Despite the room's size, only a few Ounceo sat around the fire. They bade the two nobles sit and began to pull wet, steamy chunks of meat from the roast for them.

The elder that had come to meet the Thundercats sat before them and smiled. "Now that we have some privacy, we may commence with some pleasantries before business. First, let me introduce myself properly. I am Cyrus of the Ounceo, I speak for the council."

Both Cheetara and Tygra stared at him, dumbfounded at the free giving of his name and he laughed outright.

"Young nobles, I know the laws of your kind, but you must understand we are one, here. Ounceo is who we are as a whole, but it has long ceased to be used as our name. We also stopped following your archaic belief that to give your name is to give someone power over you."

Tygra found it odd that these backwater cats could refer to the roots of their tradition as 'archaic' but said nothing.

Cyrus continued. "Even so, consider it a matter of trust. If I was unwilling to give you even my name, how could you extend trust to me in kind?"

"I agree," Cheetara said and Tygra could not help but look at her in surprise. Give this man their names? They had just met, and was he not representing his clan to them? It was unseemly! And yet, wasn't that why Lord Lion-O had chosen Cheetara? Already she was understanding these strange cats and accepting where Tygra would have balked.

"I am Atalanta Cheetara." She spoke so easily, her name flowing from her lips as though she had said it a thousand times before. It was the most beautiful thing Tygra had ever heard.

But then she looked at him expectantly and a rock fell into his stomach. It's just a name, he repeated to himself, just a name, and finally spoke.

"I am Theron Tygra." It didn't come out as strongly as he would have liked, but then Cheetara dazzled him with a bright smile and he did not worry about it.

"Tygra," Cyrus mused as though hearing the name for the first time, "Did one of the lesser clans finally overthrow the Tigris?"

Whoa, so much for the Ounceo keeping up to date on things. “When Lion-O I came to my ancestors with the Code, the Tigris changed their name to honor she that accepted it and brought us to the Thundercats. That was centuries ago.”

“My apologies, we do not hear much on the movement of individual clans. But the Tigris were a fierce people, I’m sure it wasn’t that simple.”

“There is more to the story, yes.”

Cyrus nodded, “Perhaps you can share that story with me later, Theron. But, beautiful Atalanta, you both did not come all the way to the northern ranges to trade history. Rather, let us exchange recent news so that we may understand each other better, and then tell us what you wish of we the Ounceo.”

She stood on the precipice, the wind whipping her hair around her in primal beauty, shining pure gold in the sun that slowly rose before her. Her arms were stretched outward, taking in the little warmth that sun offered. The cloak the Ounceo had given her was left behind and she stood bare, her fur the only thing between her body and the world. Tygra was transfixed.

Discussions were going well. While the Ounceo had some reservations on the mining, they were willing to work out a contract and aid the workers Lion-O would send. Siberim himself and several others would come to work out the details but for now Cheetara had procured the go-ahead for such things.

She was amazing.

They’d accepted the offer that they stay the night and despite all that Tygra had wanted to say Cheetara had been tired and had quickly fallen asleep amongst the furs. He was a young male and despite his better intentions the sight sent him out into the cold for a few hours. But there was nothing sexual about the way she bathed in the sunlight now, just a sheer beauty he was afraid would shatter if he so much as breathed.

“Why are you worried?”

He jumped at her voice. She was looking over her shoulder at him, but far from shatter the beauty she now looked like a long forgotten goddess of his ancestors. He really had to get a hold of himself, she was a cheetah, after all.

“What’s that?” he finally ground out from his dry throat.

She turned, her sun worshipping forgotten and all attention focused on him. “We’ve known each other for a long time, nearly as long as you and Panthro. You know his name, don’t you?”

She had to be a mind reader, how did she know this is what had plagued him all night? “Yes, since we were cubs.”

“Am I not your friend?” It was a genuine question, he could see the small fear in her eyes that he would reject her, deny all they were to each other.

“More than!” he gasped without meaning to, moving to her and taking her hands.

“Then why can’t I call you Theron? Why do you think I brought you with me? Our clans are not here.”

Realization dawned and Tygra couldn’t help but smile. “Clever cat, you knew about the Ounceo before we got here!”

“You think I wouldn’t do my research? Besides, how else was I going to drag your name out of you?”

“Now you have it,” he paused, his throat constricting. He was not good at this. “Atalanta, I…” He couldn’t finish, his hands, damn them, were shaking.

Cheetara’s eyes widened, as though the thought had reached her nonetheless. Her hands twisted slowly in his trembling grip until their fingers entwined. He couldn’t say anything and she didn’t need to.

Hesitantly, she placed her lips to his. It was chaste, an unsure step for two unsure people, but something in Theron snapped.

Damn the cheetahs and tigers and damn his shyness!

He pulled her close, almost roughly, tasting her, and her clawed hands buried themselves in his mane. The rising sun cast their shortening shadows on the snow covered rocks, two beings no longer discernable.