Gaining Perspective

By Lyngard

Cheetara

Author's Chapter Notes:
Special nod to fanfic author Anne C. Malcolm (Acmal). I read her work long before I knew fanfiction existed. I have borrowed the idea (with her permission, of course) of the cheetah clan being destroyed from her fic: Dark Beast Within, which I highly recommend to any ThunderCat fan out there – especially any of you Lion-O/Cheetara shippers.

The scream, long and wailing, pulled me from a dream I was more than happy to leave. My eyes flew open as I sat upright intent in finding the source of the sound. Unfortunately, I couldn't hear anything over the rushing of blood in my ears from the pounding of my heart. I took a breath not realizing that I had been holding it for more than several seconds. The air rushed noisily into my mouth as I panted to calm the growing unease surrounding me.

Slowly, I ran my hands through my hair, surprised to find them coated with moisture. I looked at my trembling, sweat soaked fingers and shuddered, a chill racing down my spine. Realization dawned; I had been the source of the scream. *Sweet Jaga, please tell me no one heard.* I sat, waiting for the sound of pounding feet that never came.

Looking at the nightstand chronometer, I sighed heavily and lay back against the cold, clammy sheets. As soon as my head rested against the pillow, memories flooded to the forefront of my consciousness. I didn't have the strength to battle them, and wave after wave of terrible images poured into my brain. How I wished the images were just that, figments of a demented imagination fractured into demons on a dreamscape, but they were realities, realities, I had forgotten or had buried deeply in my subconscious - traumas that were too painful to remember, too desperate to live beyond.

My head fell into my hands as tears broke through my barriers like the Sword of Omens seeking its master. Long, gut-wrenching sobs racked my form. Why did he come to me? *He should have found them without me. Now these demons are unleashed, and I can do nothing to stop them!*

Claustrophobia struck. Throwing myself from my bed and automatically grabbing my weapon's cuff, I stumbled to the door and palmed the key lock. Ignoring the uncharacteristic wobble to my legs, I fled down the hall.

By the time I had passed the Kittens bedrooms, I was at top speed. I hit the main door controls and had to loop myself in a circle as I waited for the great door to open wide enough to let my form pass. Blessed coolness blasted my fevered skin, and a soft mist wet my face, blending with the tears still tracking down my cheeks. I had no destination in mind; I simply ran.

I pushed harder going past the brink of exhaustion. At this point, exhaustion would be welcomed.

But for all of my speed, I could not outrun my thoughts, my memories. Breathlessly, I fell to my knees at the edge of the River of Despair. It all seemed so fitting that I almost laughed but ended up choking on a sob so powerful had I not been on my knees already it would have brought me to them. With nothing left to do, I succumbed to the primal urge, and I screamed.

Thunder rumbled in the not-so distance, and lighting blazed from cloud to cloud and cloud to ground. I'm not sure how long I stayed there venting my grief, my anguish, into the air. As the storm grew in magnitude, pouring around me mirroring the one inside me, I crouched, my throat raw, my skin chaffed by rain and tears, my knees muddy and numb. I had long since pushed my vocal cords past the point of making any audible noise. Only the sound of my ragged breathing coming in spurts could be heard.

I sagged to my hands, my fingers grasping at the loose, wet soil of the bank, and allowed my head to bow with fatigue. It was clear to me now that I needed help. I couldn't continue on like this. If I had learned anything from my encounter with Wizz-Ra, it was that secrets could be deadly. And, the one in which I found myself reliving was slowly killing me. Besides it was only a matter of time before the others started to notice if they hadn't already.

As if powered by my own thoughts, the communication device on my bow staff chirruped. *Gods, I'm a mess.* Making sure not to enable the video portion, I took a calming breath. Hoping my voice would not give away my distress, I answered, "Cheetara, here."

Static crackled on the line before I heard Lynx-O's voice tinted with worry. "Cheetara, is everything all right?"

"Everything's fine here," I replied, faking a cheeriness that left me nauseous with the effort. My comm-link was silent for a moment, and I fought the urge to continue, to fill up the quiet.

"Expecting rough weather." It was Bengali's voice this time, which seemed to growl over the communicator. "We're picking up several severe cells of a thunderstorm in your vicinity; advise you to return to the Lair."

"Copy," I responded, easily picking out the darker clouds spewing their anger across the river. Not waiting for additional information, I closed the line and pushed myself to my feet.

The trek home was longer and harder than I thought it would be. The severe weather had not jumped the river as predicted but turned northward. The Lair had escaped the brunt of the storm only receiving a gentle drizzle, which had moved beyond the courtyard at daybreak.

I surreptitiously moved to the lesser-used staircase leading to the dormitories. Even though the day was still in its infancy, I didn't wish to explain my bedraggled appearance to any potential early risers. Chilled and bone weary, I entered my room and tore off my ruined clothes. I had been so desperate to leave earlier I had worn my sleeping wrap into the murky pre-morning. Why I had had the foresight to grab my staff was still a mystery.

Perhaps years of fighting for our very existence had created the automatic response. I had learned

to be vigilant. *Where was your vigilance for my survival?* A traitorous whisper hissed in the back of my mind.

“Leave me alone,” I snarled, but the sound came as a fracturing whisper. Impulsively, I threw my weapon cuff at the bed and missed entirely. The arm shield skittered across the small end table next to the bed and hit a small vase, which shattered on impact with the floor. Anger surged once more, and in an instant, I cleared the end table completely with a slide of my arm.

Almost as quickly, my mood morphed into regret over my childish impulsivity. Not having the motivation to face the mess, I turned on my heel. *I will take care of it later*, I promised myself, steadfastly ignoring the taunting voice in my head equating my actions with the chaos of my thoughts.

By their own accord, seeking solace or at least warmth, my feet brought me to the small shower alcove of the private bathroom attached to my domicile. The chill from my impromptu run still lingered on me. I pushed the hot water to full capacity and stepped into the steaming flow.

The hot, stinging pelt of water drove like nails into my back as the shower poured over me. The pulsating rhythm slowly eased the tension in my overtaxed muscles and calmed my whirling mind. I let the heat redden the skin beneath my fur and leaned forward into the stream to clean out the mud clinging to the ends of my hair. For the first time since my abrupt awakening, I took a breath without having to push past a lump of pain. Perhaps, all I really need is a relaxing shower, I lied to myself. It was becoming easier and easier to do so.

I should have known better than to relax, to let down my guard. The smell of ozone stung my nose causing me to choke momentarily on air that was almost unfit to breathe. Gasping for oxygen, I peered through smoky, red light punctuated by the occasional brightness of electrical sparks. I could make out no shapes just blurry indications of equipment smashed beyond recognition and a steel floor biting at my skin. Blood scent reached my nostrils, the tang nauseating in its intensity. *Be well, little one, I shall miss you.* A full explosion threw me to the shower wall, and I slid down the expanse and huddled under the water my knees drawn to my chest. *Gone. All gone.*

Unable to move from psychic reverberations, I stayed in the water, drowning in memories: my becoming of age and taking a mate, the completion of my training in the Order of the ThunderCats, my induction as a ThunderCat, the news of Thundera’s ultimate demise.

When the elders had learned of the planet’s instability and core degradation, plans were made to take the populace off-world to a cluster of stars that would sustain life. As part of my duties, I had sworn to protect the life of the king’s heir. To this end, I would be traveling in the flagship with the other ThunderCats. Moments before we departed, I slipped away to see my family, my mate of two years and my two sisters and brother, as they boarded one of the five Acinonyx Clan vessels. I held the embrace of my mate especially tightly and longer than truly necessary. Kijani had looked deeply into my eyes, searching, yet I held back, waiting for the right time. There had been no second sight, no precognition to the future. That would only come after…

Be well, little one, I shall miss you. I could still hear the special rasp Kijani's voice took each time he used the endearment. I could still feel the physical blow of loss as our pair-bond was torn apart in the explosion that destroyed his ship. Not two minutes later, the other clan ships followed, destroyed in the mutant massacre. Their death echoes pounded into my psyche and ripped open my budding sixth sense. I felt the death of my mate, my family, my clan as if it had been my own.

Shaking my head, I leaned back and allowed the soothing shower to rain on my face and down my neck. These memories were nothing new. While I refused to dwell on them, they were never very far from me, a sense of loneliness I carried with me. What I hadn't remembered, grieved for…

"Enough!" I admonished myself, forcing my mind to track to the present. I would have time to examine the new information later. What I needed now was to be sure. And, the only way to do that would be through Pumyra. Giving myself some much-needed direction, I shut off the water and began to dress.

"Pumyra?" I called again as I caught site of the puma standing transfixed in the center of what was to be our new sickbay. I was starting to become alarmed at her posture and the fact she hadn't answered my previous attempt to get her attention. She suddenly looked up at me with focused eyes. "Are you all right?"

"That's my line," Pumyra finally answered and waved me into the room. "What can I do for you?"

My earlier resolve crumbled as I looked about the room. Perhaps, this was a mistake. I took a tentative step into the room and found myself unable to stand still. I occupied myself by walking around the room. I noticed that puma had already made some changes from the last time I had been down here. Finding myself back at the point where I started, I stopped and suddenly couldn't figure out what to do with my unoccupied hands. Pumyra said nothing to me the whole entire time I moved about her space. She was waiting me out. Knowing I had been the one to seek her, I shoved my hands under my crossed arms and decided to start with small talk to warm me up on the topic I truly wished to bridge. "Been doing a little rearranging?"

Pumyra's cinnamon-colored eyes gleamed as she stared at me for a moment. In that brief flicker, where her eyes roamed my face, I could see her gauging my actions with my words and knew that she knew that this was a stalling tactic. Rather than call me on it, she chose to answer my question. "Just detailing a supply list so far. All of the equipment is in pristine condition. Doesn't look like it's been used much."

"No," I agreed, softly. Without control, my thoughts flitted to my doomed clan and then to myself. "We've been lucky." The incongruity of my words made me cringe at the deception I was living. Luck was not on my side. How could I ask my question without raising additional questions? I needed answers not the emotions of others with which to deal. This was a mistake.

Blinking my thoughts back to the recesses of my mind, I changed the subject, deflecting away from what I truly wanted, needed. “I just wanted to make sure that you were ready for tonight.”

“I think so; I can’t think of anything that I need. I’m just going to keep busy fulfilling the herbal wish list I made.”

Pumyra’s eyes again sharpened on my face. To dissuade her from pursuing the original topic, I continued with a nod of encouragement. “I imagine that we are lacking in a number of medicines. You might try the Keepers of the Unicorn Forest if you are looking for something in particular. They seem to know where the majority of the forest offerings are. Kit and Kat made the acquaintance of a creature called Cudi a while ago. She seems to have a vast knowledge of the herbs that grow naturally on Third Earth and may be able to lend some assistance as well.”

Pumyra took the bait and began focusing on her much loved work. “I’ll make sure to try both of those suggestions. I also have alerted Nayda of the Warrior Maidens. Tygra thought she would be a good guide as well.”

“Yes, she will. She’ll know what places in particular to avoid.”

“Is there something else?” Caught. Pumyra had not been diverted by my earlier change of topic. Maybe I should just ask. She would be bound by privacy as a healer, and it would be good to share my burden with someone. Being a woman, she would understand even more. I was about to answer when I saw the amulet the puma wore around her neck. “That is beautiful,” I murmured, as a memory of looking at jeweled wares with Kijani suddenly halted my resolve to address my situation.

Pumyra’s hand traced the chain of the necklace and deftly unclasped the hook behind her neck. Holding it out for me to have a better look, she explained, “Bengali helped me make it when we were on the island. We found some shells in the discard pile of the local Berbil fishers. They called the creature abalone. Bengali found some coral and hollowed it out, and then we cut the shell to fit inside it. We fashioned this chain from copper wires left from the mechanical matrix of Robear Bob’s ship.”

I ran my hand along the smooth surface of the shell still lost within the pleasant memory. The craftsmanship was as fine as the one in the village that we had stayed in as I awaited the anointment rites of a ThunderCat. What was I thinking, bringing my thoughts to her on today of all days? In a few hours, she was to be a ThunderCat. My selfishness shamed me, and I tried to give the necklace back to her. “Bengali is indeed a talented artisan.”

“Keep it,” she said holding up a hand to offset my protest. “They say that abalone is associated with healing, serenity, calmness, nobility, and honesty. I can’t think of a better description for a fellow ThunderCat.”

“But,” I began again, but Pumyra interrupted.

“No buts allowed. It’s settled.” She glanced at the timepiece on the wall and pushed to standing. “I’ve got to meet Nayda at the Treetop Kingdom.” She took two steps toward the door and then looked back at me to offer an invitation. “You’re welcome to come along.”

“Um, no,” I answered hastily, and then attempting to soften my response, I amended, “Maybe another time.”

Pumyra nodded her head as if she already knew that would be my response and left the room. I watched her go down the hallway as she turned the corner heading in the direction of the landing platform. My hand caressing the smooth abalone shell reminded me of where I was. Today was Pumyra’s day to be honored as a ThunderCat. Perhaps I could make something for her as a sign of welcome and as an apology for not being able to attend.

As quietly as possible, I entered the Thundertank garage bay. I knew that Panthro had slated himself to start work on *his baby* today, but I wasn’t interested in bothering him. This was something I could do myself and something I wanted to do alone anyway.

I heard a soft grunt from the panther as he placed a tool on the ground somewhere from underneath the bulk of the damaged tank. I stifled my reflex to check on him knowing he wouldn’t take kindly to my pointing out his wounds were still healing. Instead, I moved to the far side of the garage and began rummaging through the storage bins. I know that he had saved some of the gold from the thundrillium pour, but I wasn’t exactly sure where he had stored it.

Ah ha, there it was, buried underneath several full thundrillium receptacles. Of course, it wouldn’t be in easy accessibility. Why was it every time you needed something it was in the far reaches of space and almost impossible to get to? I debated for a moment asking for help, but decided that I could manage as long as I kept the load balanced on the furthest receptacle.

My confidence in my abilities wavered as the entire load of thundrillium receptacles shifted and started to lean into me. I was going to be making a mess; Panthro wasn’t going to be too happy. I was just about to bolt out of the way and let gravity win when a large gray/black body moved me forcibly to the side and halted the load from its plummet to the floor.

I heard the panther grunt with effort and could almost hear his injured ribs protesting against such mistreatment as we stabilized the cartons and freed the bin of gold impurities. Worry that he had re-damaged his healing bones hugged my voice as I called to him. “Panthro, are you all right?”

“What the blazes are you doing?” Panthro roared, as he pulled his arm across his ribs in some sort of protective cushion.

“I needed to get into this carton,” I explained pointing to the bin that we had freed. I took no offense to his tone; he had every right to be upset. I knew he would be even more displeased as soon as he realized what I was trying to get into in the first place.

A myriad of emotions played across his face finally halting on distaste. I could read his thoughts as if he were projecting them - *She risked herself and me, for that matter, for this. Gold, again, I should have known.* I blinked hard ridding the sensation of mind reading and heard him ask, curiosity rather than anger tinting his words, “And, what are you planning on doing with it this time?”

“A special project,” I replied, purposefully being vague.

“Special, huh?”

Feeling guilty about his injury, I asked, “You are okay, aren’t you?”

“I’m fine,” he answered and then looked hard at me. “What about you, are you all right?”

Ignoring the sudden tightness in my chest and the urge to purge all of my feelings at once, I waved him off with a slight attempt at humor. “I’m not the one who got hit with a ton of ore.”

“No, but you do look like you are still shouldering that weight. What’s wrong?”

Panthro’s perceptiveness made me question my original plan to escape in solitude. Busying myself, instead, I turned and opened the carton of gold. There were plenty of nuggets that would suit my purpose. I pulled out the cleanest specimens and closed the lid. “I’ve got a lot to do before tonight. Might I borrow your smelting equipment?”

Panthro looked startled for a moment as his gaze slanted to the midday light shining through the clouds and filtering into the garage. “The bay’s all yours,” he invited, motioning to the section of the garage that was set up to handle extracting thundrillium from other ores.

As he turned to go, I was struck with the sudden urge to tell him, seek some solace to get me through the evening. “Panthro?” He stopped and turned to look at me.

My resolve dissipated like the mist from the Geyser of Life. This was not the time. I needed to let the others have their day. My issues had been with me for a long time; another day would not change things. Panthro’s hand on my shoulder brought me back to the present, but now was not the right time. *You never had a right time,* a pesky voice hummed in the back of my mind. With great effort, I pushed away thoughts that would do me no good. Mustering a semblance of a smile for my dear, panther friend, I finished, “Thanks.”

“Any time,” he answered, his tawny eyes searching my amber one’s. He gave my shoulder a gentle squeeze of encouragement, a reminder of the friend he truly was. As I watched his back as he left the bay, a moment of weakness almost made me call to him again. But, instead, I chose the path of silence. *I will not ruin this day for them,* I resolved.

Depositing my finished project in sickbay, I turned down the hallway that led to the sublevels of the Lair. I was looking for Tygra, and one of the storage chambers seemed the most logical place to start. If Lion-O were to perform the ritual induction tonight, he would need the ThunderCat emblems. Tygra was the one Jaga had selected to guard these talismans until the time was right, and I knew that the tiger had placed them in one of the vast storage areas for safe keeping.

Choosing the second room at random, I began my search for Tygra. I was in the process of rehearsing my words of excuse from tonight's festivities in my head when I heard, "Hello, Cheetara."

I nearly jumped at the tiger's proximity. I had been so lost in my inner dialogue that I hadn't realized that my search had ended prematurely. "Tygra," I could hear the surprise still registering in my voice. "I'm glad I caught you."

Tygra turned to look at me fully. He seemed to study me for a moment, and then his gaze dropped to the disks in his hand. My own eyes followed his lead. These were the insignias that proclaimed us ThunderCats. While they started out blank, at the end of the evening, they would be etched with the symbol of Truth, Justice, Honor, and Loyalty. Suddenly, my own ThunderCat crest felt heavy on my chest.

"What's up?" Tygra finally asked, breaking my stare from the emblems in his hands.

I blinked at the tiger in attempt to chase away the thoughts flitting through my head. I had been so taken off guard by his appearance that I totally forgot the script in my head, and instead, I blurted out, "I want to volunteer for watch during the inaugurations."

Tygra looked at me in surprise. I could see the wheels turning in his head as he tried to decipher my outburst. Rather than question me directly, he turned the tables by asking, "Did you have a vision?"

If he only knew, my thoughts betrayed me, and I had to suppress the urge to confess how true his words might be. But, the vision he spoke of had nothing to do with our exodus from Thundera, so my denial would not be a complete untruth. "No, no, nothing like that. I just thought that with all the festivities we'd be a little shorthanded. I wanted to let you know that if the shift was still open, I could take it."

"Nonsense," Tygra dismissed my request and put the inactivate symbols in a velvety sack. Pulling the drawstring, he continued, "Snarfer has agreed to monitor the system during the anointment ritual and reception following. You won't have to volunteer your services until the two am shift," he winked at me.

Although his attempt to sway me failed miserably, he was too distracted by the appearance of Lion-O to notice. "Ah, Lion-O," he greeted the lion, who was attempting to retreat from our field of vision.

"Tygra, am I glad to find you," Lion-O returned. I could see him look questioningly between the

two of us before entering the room again. I'm sure he was intuitive enough to realize that he might be interrupting something.

"Seems that I've been lost by several of you in the past few hours," Tygra answered with a smile, equating Lion-O's words with the few I had spoken only moments ago. He glanced at me, and for a moment, I thought he might ask to see the lion after finishing our conversation.

"Can we talk on the way over? I've got to help Panthro with the sound system." His dismissal of me hurt more than I realized it would. I needed to talk to him, to convince him to allow me to view the festivities from the safety of the control room. However, our conversation must have seemed concluded to him.

Lion-O must have noticed my distress because his voice sounded like an apology directed to me even though his words were spoken to Tygra. "Uh, well, sure, I guess. I just wanted to go over my toast with someone."

Tygra coughed lightly and again glanced in my direction. I knew exactly what he was thinking. *Oh please, don't, Tygra,* I pleaded, internally. My plea was unheard. In a space of a nanosecond, the tiger was out the door with these parting words, "Then, I think, Cheetara is the perfect person to use as a sounding board."

As Lion-O and I stood looking at each other, the large storage room seemed to close in on us. Because he had been but a mere cub when Thundera was destroyed, he had little to no recollection of how the events played out and affected the rest of us. His recent request to use my sixth sense to relive Thundera and, unknown to him and the others, the aftermath, made it easier for me to blame him for unleashing my repressed memories. And, now he had inadvertently impacted my conversation with Tygra. Although, to be fair, Tygra had, by his own actions, already concluded the conversation. Still, if I could have just had a few more moments with the tiger, perhaps, I could have changed his mind.

"I'm sorry that I interrupted. It looked like you and Tygra were in the middle of something."

I looked into the lion's russet eyes. His apology was written more so on his face than even his words could convey. Immediately feeling regret over my treatment of him, I replied, "No, no, it was nothing." Even to my own ears, the words sounded less sincere than I intended them to be.

Lion-O ran a hand through his mane and looked down at me. From this distance, it was easy to feel intimidated by his large form. However, I never felt that way with him. His large presence was more comforting, always conveying a sense of protection. But, even the Lord of the ThunderCats couldn't protect me.

"Please tell me what is going on," Lion-O urged, his voice softly insistent.

I stepped away, suddenly feeling too close to him. "Nothing is going on, other than me being late to help in the kitchen," I explained, trying not to concentrate on the rough edge of worry in his voice.

I couldn't do this. His concern would be my undoing. His proximity and my own pain were too much to bear, and I turned to leave. I felt his warm hand on my shoulder. A connection sparked between us, and I had to stop to keep myself from falling. All of my grief welled to the surface, and it became hard to breathe. No, I would not burden him with this, my fault to bear. Lion-O's hand slipped from my shoulder, and I turned to look at him, doing my best to bury my thoughts. "Please," I could barely find a voice to speak.

"Cheetara," Lion-O started and then stopped, his eyes searching my face. The emotions dancing in those pools of garnet pulled at my heart. He could be so compelling, but this wasn't the time.

Be well, little one, I shall miss you. "Not now," I pleaded, and turning abruptly, I fled the room.

I finally came to a stop just outside of the kitchen. Leaning against the wall, I paused to catch my breath. I had been negligent in my duties for the festivities and was unsure how I would be received. Making my best attempt to appear calm, I opened the door.

Snarf's usual, pristine kitchen was a setting of organized chaos. The Kittens were in the process of adding to a platter of bite-sized appetizers, and Snarf was overseeing them, attending to the stove, and muttering things to himself. Ever the multitasker, his ears perked up at my arrival, and without turning around, he addressed me. "Cheetara, about time, snarf, snarf. I could use your help on the fruit trays."

Glad to be occupied, I quickly washed my hands and set to work on cutting the various fruits for a colorful tray. I'm not sure how long I stood there chopping and arranging. I had completed about four trays when I caught the scent of Snarf's special herbal tea blend. I glanced down to find a steaming mug set at my elbow; a prized, candyfruit muffin accompanied it.

"Snarf," I began, touched at his consideration.

The little creature simply waved me off as he applied flower shaped, fruit garnishes to the trays I had completed.

"Hey, how come she gets one?" complained Wily Kat, who had looked up from his tray of foodstuffs. You told us that you were completely out."

"She hasn't eaten all day," Snarf announced, simply. "You can't go an entire day without food."

"Why haven't you eaten? Come to think of it, you weren't at dinner last night either." Wily Kit abandoned the tray she had been working on and walked up to me.

She had grown so much in the past several years, shedding the look of kittenhood and becoming a young woman. A burning pain in my throat precluded me from answering, and I covered by taking a sip of the hot tea, hoping the liquid would ease an ache that had nothing to do with my

physical well being.

“She’s been busy getting things ready and taking extra watch duties. Now, go along and see that the early morning rains haven’t damaged the decorations,” Snarf ordered, taking the responsibility of answering for me.

Apparently, that had been the reprieve the Kittens had been awaiting. They were scampering out the door almost before Snarf had finished speaking. Snarf muttered softly; the words while unintelligible were tinged with affection. Dragging his own mug with him, Snarf sighed, pulled up a stool, and settled next to me. He regarded me over the rim of his steaming cup.

Silence stretched between us. It wasn’t an unpleasant sensation, but there were undertones of awaiting explanations for my recent behavior. I broke off a piece of the muffin and put it in my mouth, thinking that he would be pleased to see me eating and hoping it would assuage the questions he wasn’t currently voicing.

“Cheetara,” he began, modulating his tone away from the usual nagging voice he used to get Lion-O’s cooperation. “Is there something wrong?”

“Just tired.” I fiddled with the mug of tea and chose the easiest answer to dissuade further investigation.

“No wonder since even in the few moments that you have been off-duty, you haven’t been sleeping, snarf, snarf,” he noted, leaving plenty of room for me to fill the void.

I looked sharply at him, gauging what else he had observed. The snarf remained impossible as always to read. Osbert had always exuded an air of bumbling over-protectiveness, but that act was simply a shield for his shrewd, intuitive nature. “Things have been busy,” I alluded to his earlier given excuse for me, thinking that was one of the most inadequate euphemisms to describe my life the past week.

“Hmm,” he made a noncommittal sound and resumed his stance of waiting.

Things were going to get too close for comfort soon. Looking for any pretext, my eyes fell to the finished trays of fruit. Pushing back from my chair, I stood and carried two of them to the staging area. “As soon as Lion-O finishes the anointments, I will help you with the catering,” I promised. “Now,” making a great show of looking at the chronometer and not allowing the snarf a chance to get a word in edgewise, I continued to the door, “I’m going to be late, if I don’t start getting ready for tonight.” With those parting words, I left a seldom seen, speechless Snarf in his domain.

Music and laughter filtered down the hallway through my closed door as I regarded myself in the full-length mirror. For a fleeting moment, I wished that the portal from the Seventh Dimension might open. All I really wanted was a place to escape, rest, but that would not happen today.

Turning away from the mirror and my thoughts, I surveyed my room. After leaving Snarf, I had spent my few hours before the anointment cleaning up the mess left from my earlier temper tantrum. I had not stopped there; my entire room and adjoining bath were spotless. This was my therapy, a physical manifestation of purging myself from the muddle of my mind.

From the window, I caught the faint glimmer of a thunderstorm rumbling and flashing lightning among a few grey clouds on the distant horizon. While it matched my mood better than the festive excitement generating throughout the Lair, I still hoped that the rains would not come our way. It was important that we honor the three new Thunderians to our ranks. A thunderstorm would not only dampen the festivities, but would most likely result in our moving the entire party into the great room.

I moved back to the mirror and glanced again at my reflection. The cloak created by Snarf and Wily Kit, covered my shoulders and ran the full length of my body softly resting against my heels. It was made of dark amber velvet that complimented not only the colors of my dress uniform but the color of my eyes. The clasp was arranged to connect under my neck at the same juncture of my ThunderCat emblem. My eyes drifted to that red crest and a wave of sadness crossed my heart. *Now is not the time to play what ifs,* I chided to myself.

Knowing that my presence would be missed, I attempted to chase away the haunted look in my eyes and moved to open the door to my room. I was surprised to find Lynx-O waiting outside. "Lynx-O?"

"Cheetara," he greeted me, "I was wondering if I might escort you to the anointment."

I paused for a moment looking at the older lynx and marveling at the calmness he exuded. Just being in his presence caused a healing balm to wash over my soul. "I would be honored," I replied and slid my arm into the crook of his offered elbow. We walked to the gardens in companionable silence. The lynx never faltered once.

At the raised dais, he moved so that I might go in front of him. I took my position between Tygra and Panthro, and Lynx-O took his position center stage, facing the audience of our Third Earth allies. Moments later, Bengali and Pumyra arrived. They had just settled into their places when the soft music that had been playing swelled signifying the commencement of the anointment.

"And so my friends, it is with great joy I welcome the newest members of the ThunderCat family. I know that the roads we have all traveled have not been kind, but I believe that as long as the Code lives, we will continue to reunite our people." Lion-O concluded his speech, and I found myself wrapped up in the memories of the roads I had traveled, had yet to fully travel and understand.

I felt eyes upon me and looked up into Tygra's penetrating gaze. Doing my best to close the portals of my soul, I glanced away and raised my glass to clink with his in agreement with Lion-

O’s sentiments. I forced a calm smile to my face as I turned to regard the Lord of the ThunderCats once more.

Lion-O stretched out the Sword of Omens and called “ThunderCats, Ho!” The sword reacted immediately to its master’s command shifting to its true form. I felt the Eye of Thundera touch the ThunderCat symbol residing on my chest as the sword growled in its power, and I was immediately struck with memories I had not thought about since my feet had been on Thundera herself. I felt the annoying burn of tears, and one slipped down my cheek. Brushing it away, I closed off those bittersweet memories and focused on the new recruits.

“As Lord of the ThunderCats and in Truth, Justice, Honor, and Loyalty, I name thee ThunderCat, Lynx-O, ThunderCat, Bengali, and ThunderCat, Pumyra.” The Sword of Omens growled in approval, and a swath of light poured from the Eye etching a black cat’s head on the red medallion each member wore.

The sword quieted, done with its mission, and the three new ThunderCats raised their voices as one, “Ho!” Their enthusiasm was infectious. Within seconds, the entire platform and surrounding crowd of well-wishers erupted in applause of welcome. Lion-O paused for a few moments allowing the crowd to quiet on its own. With a beaming smile on his face, the lion returned the sword to its proper place on the clawshield resting against his thigh and said, “Well, now that the formalities are over, let’s get this party started.”

As the music began to swell, a receiving line formed to my left. There were a number of Third Earthers who wished to make the acquaintance of the new allies. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught sight of Lion-O maneuvering Pumyra off the platform. A strange sense of envy prickled up my spine as they began to sway on the dance floor. Some might have called it jealousy, but tonight it wasn’t about being the center of attention with the lion. That was the least of my wishes; my desire was to be removed from the formalities of greeting our guests.

At a small lull in the line, I excused myself and headed off for the relative obscurity of working the buffet lines. At the food tables, I was able to avoid the majority of the crowd. Not that I didn’t wish to be part of the revelry; I just couldn’t seem to find the enthusiasm, and I was concerned that others might draw the wrong conclusions.

After all of the trays had been set, I walked over to the beverage station and took a glass of the candyfruit wine. I found a quiet spot near the garden wall where I could observe the buffet tables and the rest of the activities but still remain in relative seclusion. The Kittens had taken Wollo partners and were actively engaged in an interpretative dance to the Berbil symphony. Looking to the original platform, I saw Tygra, Panthro, Bengali, and Lynx-O engaged in a conversation with Willa and Nayda. Snarf was busy overseeing the buffet.

A gentle breeze lifted the hair from my neck. I turned into the wind to cool my face and found myself looking at the horizon beyond the garden wall. The storm appeared to have granted us clemency. My thoughts turned to my early morning face off with a squall of a different kind. Quickly, I drained my glass in an effort to stem those unpleasant thoughts. I looked at the empty glass with chagrin. I should be careful; I’ve never been very good about holding my liquor.

A voice called me to me, “Cheetara, come join us.”

I felt my back go straight at the lion’s call. How had he spotted me in the shadows? I looked into his eyes and knew that I would not be able to avoid him. Sighing in resignation, I walked over to the lion and puma. “I was just telling Pumyra how nice it is to focus our attention on the good things in life instead of the constant vigil we’ve had for danger,” he smiled, removing my empty glass and replacing it with a full one.

“Danger is never very far,” I replied, already feeling the hackles on the back of my neck rising. I clenched the glass tighter to stop a shudder from being noticeable. *You should know,* a taunting voice whispered out of reach of my internal defenses.

“True,” Lion-O rejoined, “But at least, we have allies.” The lion held up his glass in unspoken proposal to a toast. Hesitantly, I raised my glass to join both his and Pumyra’s. “To family,” *the one that you killed,* the voice in my head added accusingly, “May our bond of brotherhood and sisterhood never…”

“She is not and never will be my sister!” I growled, cutting Lion-O off abruptly. My brain suddenly caught up with my mouth. *What had I done, said!* Horrified by the scene I had caused, I misjudged the distance of my hand to the table and ended up slamming my glass against the tabletop. Red pooled onto the white tablecloth. My hand smarted from the slash it received on the broken glass, but it was less painful than the public spectacle I had made of myself. I had to get out of there. With a quick turn, I broke away from the puma and lion. I had ruined everything.

Distantly, I heard Tygra call my name, but I could not now, not here. Besides, I had no explanation that I wished to share. G*ods, an attack by the mutants would be better than this horror I had created.* Within seconds, I was up the stairs through a side entrance to the Lair. The joyous decorations swayed in the wake of my departure. *Where do I go?*