Litha

By Lyngard

Story Notes:

A/N: This is quite a bit different from my usual writing in this fandom. For one, it is written in third person. Also, this story heavily features the Warrior Maidens – the ThunderCats are mostly cameos or guest appearances here. However, rest assured, my next foray will once again focus on our favorite felines.

This story takes place a short time after *Mumm-Ra Lives* – and approximately 3 months after Storm Surge for those of you that follow a canon-centered/fanon-centered timeline.

I wrote this one-shot not only to give some stronger background on some of the other denizens of Third Earth but also to pay homage to the solstice occurring in the Northern Hemisphere on the 21st of June, 2009. This will also be a story which will eventually set up answers as to why so many Third Earth residents seems to have ties to Plundarr as well as Thundera.

A/N2: Special thanks to Azmom (EOT) for giving me permission to use her ideas about the Warrior Maidens and for giving me inspiration for my own take on them.

Author's Chapter Notes:

Sources:
Litha: Blessed Litha, from web http://twopagans.com/holiday/Litha.html
Midsummer: from web http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Midsummer

Litha

The faint hiss of a flame catching broke the stillness, and a thin strip of wood flared brightly releasing a fragrant burst of lavender into the dimness. With deft fingers, Willa pinched off the burning end and watched the flameless smoke carry the aroma into the pre-dawn light. Inhaling the scent, almost acrid in its potency, she leaned back in her chair and waited for the calming herb to settle her. Only after regaining control of her suddenly racing heart did she allow her eyes to open to scan the small hut surrounding her.

Her home was not stately by any stretch of the imagination. She claimed only a small dwelling at the heart of the Treetop Kingdom. The furniture was sparse, and while made by the most skilled craftswomen – images carved in relief, details of past battles and victories painted in natural dyes that highlighted the intricate depressions and ridges – there were no additional embellishments of precious metals or stones. Unlike the Tabbots, the Warrior Maidens had no need for those possessions.

Willa's nose wrinkled with the thought of the single horned, porcine creatures whose sole purpose in life was to amass wealth. She shook her head banishing the thoughts from her mind. Today was not about greed; today was about the goddess, about unadulterated joy, about children. Again, Willa's heart sped up with her thoughts, but she had no time to address it as a familiar voice called through the animal hide covering her door.

"Willa? Sister, are you awake?"

Willa's hands skimmed down the white, thigh length sheath she wore, not at all her usual clothing, and straightened the floral garland that cinched around her waist before answering, "Enter, Nayda. I'm presentable, more or less," she muttered the last part under her breath but was immediately side tracked by Nayda's appearance.

Her sister too wore clothing not at all reminiscent of the two-piece outfits that she usually preferred. Her dress was similar in the length to Willa's landing just above the crease of her knee. A small V of shimmery, golden string tied the halter style dress around her neck while the rest of the material flowed loosely. Its pale yellow color set off Nayda's skin, a hue one shade lighter than Willa's, and highlighted the reds in her henna colored hair, which hung loosely with small yellow flowers woven through it. She was lovely, and she had decided.

As soon as she entered the tent, Nayda made tsking sounds in the back of her throat while appraising her sister's appearance. "You aren't even halfway ready," she scolded lightly. "Have you decided? Up or down?"

Willa watched the small hurricane that was her sister flitter about the hut and then deposit an assortment of grooming utensils onto a small table, which already held a clear bowl with a red blossom floating on top of a translucent liquid. The flower was from the eternity plant and one that Willa regularly wore in her hair, but today it would remain in the small bath of water gathered so many years ago by her mother from the Geyser of Life.

Willa's memories drifted into the past, and she wondered, not for the first time, why she was the ruler of the Treetop Kingdom. She had been nineteen years old when she had taken up the mantel as Queen of the Warrior Maidens. Unlike the Lord of the ThunderCats who had his title foisted upon him by the untimely death of his father and the destruction of his home world, her mother had simply bestowed the royal title upon her. After her coronation, the former queen had left the kingdom to take care of the children who were not yet old enough to serve and to assist the maidens who had decided to procreate with their chosen males. Even after almost a decade of serving her people, Willa still did not know what had caused her mother to choose a life on the sea rather than among the trees.

Nayda's fingers gently undoing the leather tassel that kept Willa's hair pulled away from her face broke her reverie. "Up or down?" her sister prompted again, as she began pulling a coarse brush through the now free locks.

"Down," Willa answered and shifted her body so that her sister would have complete access to the back of her head. She felt the briefest hesitation in Nayda's fingers before the bristles

resumed their path through her long ebony hair. She also heard the soft release of air in a not very well hidden sigh.

“You disagree?” Willa asked. There was no accusation in her tone. She wanted Nayda to know she was talking to her sister and not the queen.

“I was hoping this year you might change your mind.” Nayda replied, continuing to pull the brush with long steady strokes through Willa’s hair.

“Are you that ready to take the throne?”

“Of course not! How can you even say that? Much less think that?”

Apparently, Willa had hidden the teasing in her tone too well. She hadn’t expected her words to be taken literally. “Peace, sister.” Willa held up her hands in a conciliatory gesture. “I was only joking.”

“Well, it wasn’t very funny.” Even with the apology given, Nayda still did not sound mollified. “I just want you to be happy, you know.”

Willa sighed silently and then asked the question she really didn’t want answered. Normally, she would have ignored such a comment, but she knew that she could not do that, not now, not after she had opened the door herself. “And you think that I’m not?”

Nayda laid the brush on the table and swiveled Willa’s chair around so they were face to face. “No, I don’t. When was the last time you participated in Litha? And, I don’t mean as the mistress of ceremonies or as an observer? You’re not getting any younger, sister. Is one offspring enough for you, for us?”

Willa’s head snapped back and her shoulders straightened with Nayda’s words. Her sister had not pulled any punches, and the delivery had directly hit its intended target. If anyone other than Nayda had said those things to her, she would have immediately been punished for insubordination. As it were, the hidden wounds Nayda had inflicted out of love, no less, were enough for her to consider throwing her sister in the hold for the entire Litha celebration. Whether intended or not, the statement was ripe with hidden meanings that easily bordered on treason.

“I wouldn’t worry too much, sister; you’ll get your chance at the throne. A male heir holds no claim to the Treetop Kingdom.”

“Willa, that is not what I meant.” Nayda reacted as well and dropped her head into her hands.

Knowing that her face was probably showing the myriad of emotions she was experiencing, Willa pulled herself from the chair that she had been sitting in and walked to the lone window of her hut. The dark blue of the sky was just beginning to show hints of orange and pinks from the sun beginning its ascent into the sky. Even though her view was obstructed from actually seeing

the white sand of beaches that bordered the Hunting Plains, she knew that they would be arriving soon. She leaned her head against the rough frame and closed her eyes seeking the inner strength she would need to make it through the day.

“Willa, please, sister,” Nayda began but fell silent when the stiffness in Willa’s back did not relax. Instead of continuing, she set the brush back on the small table and began arranging the small flowers that needed to be woven into her sister’s hair. Her fingers brushed against the glass bowl holding the eternity bloom, and she stopped. “Do you think that she will come?”

Willa turned toward Nayda. In the pale light filtering from the dawn and the flickering of firelight waning in the hearth, Nayda did not look her age at all. She looked like she had when their mother had left: confused, sad, and alone. When their mother had made the decision to relinquish her title and throne, Nayda had been twelve, the age of ascension to take her rightful place next to her sister and their mother in the Treetop Kingdom. Although she had never said anything, Willa knew that Nayda often wondered if she had been the reason their mother had left.

Nayda had never known the queen, her mother. While their mother had continued her duties in the Treetop Kingdom, Nayda had been raised communally with other children and matrons that had already served their time among the trees. The Litha celebration that had marked her ascension had also marked Willa’s coronation and their mother’s departure.

“She hasn’t come to one since she left; why would she come now?” The bitterness that Willa had strived to conceal in her words rang harshly in the dimness.

Nayda lifted her head and stared into her sister’s eyes. They shared a moment of quiet misery before Willa returned to her chair. With no more words, Nayda threaded the flowers into her sister’s hair. Her fingers were quick and sure, but the silence that stretched between them was fraught with tension.

“Why did you decide down, Nayda?”.

“I’m not ready.”

The reply was too quick, too calculated: as if she had been ready for the question, almost expecting it. “You are not getting any younger either,” Willa reminded her.

Nayda laughed, a short barking noise that held no humor. “Perhaps not, but my beliefs are still rather arcane. Finished.” Nayda handed her sister a wooden framed mirror and turned to the task of arranging the utensils to take back with her to her own hut.

Willa scarcely examined her reflection and instead used the mirror to focus on her sister. “What beliefs might those be?” The slump in Nayda’s shoulders showed that this was an unwanted topic, but Willa refused to be dissuaded.

“The elders made their pact for two reasons, peace and procreation. It worked for us back then,

our numbers had been so small that our likelihood of survival had been minimal at best. We are flourishing now, but we still cling to the old traditions."

Willa put down the mirror to look directly at her sister. "Tell me that you've not spoken these words to anyone but me."

Nayda must have seen the strain on her sister's face because she quickly answered, "You have my word. What is it, Willa?"

"The things you've said, Nayda – Please, say no more!"

"They are just idle thoughts, sister."

"They are words that will exile you from the Warrior Maidens, from the Treetop Kingdom. Do you understand?"

"I wouldn't have said anything if you hadn't asked me."

That unsatisfactory answer did not sit well with Willa. "I can command you to wear your hair up, to find a suitor, to continue your duties, to prove your loyalty."

"Would you so order?" Nayda's voice trembled with a mixture of anger and betrayal.

"Don't force me to choose between being your blood sister and your queen."

"As you wish, Your Majesty." Nayda quickly gathered her things and left the hut.

Willa almost called out to her, but she knew that in this case, she could not. She returned to the window and watched her sister's back as it quickly disappeared from sight. She didn't need to look at Nayda's face to know that she was upset. It was obvious from her halting strides and weaving path that tears were obstructing her sister's vision. One of the other maidens tried to stop Nayda, but she was waved off quickly.

Willa shook her head. There would be damage control, but that would have to come later. There were too many things left to do for the celebration, and judging from the angle of the sun's beams just beginning to hit the roofs of the treetop huts, time was already progressing. Their conversation may have made the longest day of the year that much longer.

From an upper platform, Willa watched as the children, who had arrived on the boats, played in a small circle on the lowest dais of the Treetop Kingdom. They were ranging in age from toddler to children just under the age of ascension: male and female intermingling with joy as they

played a variety of games that Willa could not comprehend. Her gaze rose to the women that had decided to take part in the Litha celebration. They were mingling with the females that had accompanied the procession from the ships that had arrived earlier this day. She recognized two of the women who had left with the ships last year. Both were now heavy with the blessing of children.

Another generation would be born sometime this fall. The new mothers would stay with their children until the young ones were weaned. Then next Litha they would return to their duties in the Treetop Kingdom. The cycle would continue, their way of life intact, the human race still viable.

Without consciously meaning to, her eyes found her sister sitting far below with a small group of the Thunderians that had crashed their way to Third Earth, in a giant fireball, over three solar years ago. Thoughtfully, Willa bit her lip as she watched Tygra and Nayda talking; they were too far away for her to hear them, but she had the feeling had she been sitting right next to them, she would not have been privy to their conversation.

The tiger Thunderian and maiden had a special connection that had been forged from the time the two had been trapped in invisibility when they had rescued Willa from Castle Plundarr. That event had happened within the first year of the ThunderCats being part of their world, but Tygra and Nayda's connection to each other was as strong as ever. Even while being physically present within a large group, they seemed to be able to create an intimacy, an affinity, between them that was not breached by others.

Should I be worried? The queen wondered. An alliance with the powerful and noble, alien feliniods was one thing, but was Nayda seeking something else? Quiet footsteps fell on the planks behind her. She waited until they stopped a respectful distance before turning to the newcomer.

She had expected to see Kaleb standing before her. She had seen him leading the procession from the ship, and she had seen the disappointment in his eyes when he had addressed her. Did he expect that even if her hair were up she would choose him again? He was a strong man, an attentive lover, and hopefully a good father, but she could not allow the impression that any man could have dominance over her.

To her surprise, it wasn't her past suitor but the Lord of the ThunderCats who stood before her. "Lion-O," she greeted. The pleasure – or was it relief? – she had that it was his company and not someone else's radiated through her voice.

"Greetings, Willa, Queen of the Warrior Maidens," he reciprocated the customary salutation even without the audience of other onlookers.

"Always respectful." She smiled up at him as he approached her. As it always had, his sheer size amazed her; however, she hid her admiration well. "It is good to see you and your companions; it has been too long."

“That it has,” Lion-o agreed and leaned his large, well-muscled forearms on the railing that overlooked the events taking place in the natural courtyard below. “The introduction of the Lunatacs coupled with the reappearance of Mumm-Ra has made for some difficult times. We thought with more of us, peace would be easier, but it seems as we grow our enemies grow as well.”

“Strength in numbers only goes so far,” Willa agreed and found herself looking back at her sister. Nayda’s words echoed softly in her head. *‘We are flourishing now, but we still cling to the old traditions.’*

“My apologies for being late; we were attending to some business.”

“This is the longest day of the year, Lion-O; there is no such thing as being late.” She looked at the lion’s profile as he watched the activities below and followed his gaze as it lingered on Wily Kit and Cheetara, who was sitting next to the younger Thunderian female, far removed from the others of their group.

“This business, is it something I should be concerned about?” Her brain was already conjuring up possible strategies for protecting the visiting humans and her maidens if the mutants or some other unwelcome intruder dared to attempt an attack during the festivities. Even with the added defenses the ThunderCat’s presence brought, she knew the group would be vulnerable during Litha. In fact, in some regards, the ThunderCats proximity might stir up more trouble, but she did not regret her invitation.

“No,” Lion-O replied, his gaze still on the pair of females. “We were taking care of a promise made.”

“It sounds as though this promise carried sad duties.”

Lion-O’s shoulders slumped, and he broke his gaze from his companions to look at the intuitive queen. “Yes, we were performing a burial.”

Willa felt her mouth fall open in a silent oh before she recovered. “I’m sorry, Lion-O; I had no idea.” The ThunderCats’ somberness as they arrived during one of the more enthusiastic reenactments of the Oak King conquering the Holly King suddenly came back to her. She glanced back to the Thunderians attending and noticed for the first time that the small, furry creatures known as snarves were not present.

She silently cursed her lack of observation and lack of communication with the ThunderCats. She knew that a new threat had made itself known on the far side of Third Earth, the impenetrable DarkSide, but she had been intent on her duties in the Treetop Kingdom and had not had the time to look further into the matter. As long as the danger stayed in Darkside, it was not an impending threat to her kingdom. While she had not been involved with the Lunatacs, the ThunderCats had apparently experienced more than a casual encounter and had suffered casualties as well.

“Snarf was a noble member of your group. He always brought his special herbal tea blend when he visited, he will be missed.”

Lion-O looked at the queen with confusion. “Be missed?” Then the lion realized what Willa must have thought. “Oh, no, not Snarf. He and his nephew Snarfer agreed to stay behind to man the Lair and Tower. No, the burial was for an ancient Thunderian that crash landed on Third Earth many centuries ago before even Grune.”

Willa felt the trill of anger course through her at the name of the evil entity that had terrorized the residents of Third Earth so many years ago, but the emotion was at odds with the sense of relief that also filled her at the clarification that Snarf was still among the living. “Well, thank the goddess for Snarf’s health, but an ancient Thunderian, Grune – she felt the heat of acid on her tongue from the mere mention of his name – you all, Pumyra, Bengali and Lynx-O? This seems like more than a coincidence. How many of you have been on our planet? What is it about Third Earth that seems to draw you here? And not just you, but your ancient enemies as well – the mutants and now the Lunatacs.”

“We’ve been wondering the same thing,” Lion-O admitted and turned back to the crowd gathering among the several bonfires below. His gaze searched where Cheetara had been, but she and Kit were no longer there.

“Maybe the Oracle will know,” Willa suggested, and then also noticing the change in the activities below, she began walking to the rope ladder leading to the ground.

“What’s the Oracle?” Lion-O asked abandoning his search and following the queen.

“Do you remember the memory stones that you and Lynx-O sought to retrieve from Hook Mountain in the old Mines of the Mystic Chasm? The Oracle is very similar to those stones; in fact, it is one as well. But, this stone is much larger. It is about the size of a full-length mirror and faceted rather than smooth-sided.” Willa’s feet hit the earth, and she waited for Lion-O to join her on the ground before continuing.

“Several generations ago, the crystal was discovered and taken to the Treetop Kingdom. The queen at the time was also a powerful psychic and learned that if she tried, she could imprint her memories and the memories of the stories told generations before her into the stone. She began the full recoding of the Warrior Maiden’s history as well as the other human tribes, but she paid a price. For each memory, each piece of history she imparted, she lost a little more of her psychic self. Eventually, she and the crystal merged into a single, sentient being and became what we know as the Oracle.

“But the queen had disappeared, at least physically, and she had left no female heir to take over her duties thus leaving the kingdom vulnerable. Other tribes of humans learned of the crystal’s existence. Some believed the crystal evil; others believed that it could be a devastating weapon – reducing rival tribes to mere memories and imprisoning them in its crystal walls. It was a dark time in our history, tribe fought against tribe for control of a stone that really was simply a vessel of history, for history.

“After a particularly bloody battle, the remaining Treetop Kingdom maidens knew that they must hide the Oracle far away or risk being destroyed by tribes who did not understand that it was the power of knowledge they carried not a physical weapon. They made a pact with a tribe that lives far away on the other side of the sea. In exchange for this tribe hiding the Oracle, the Treetop Kingdom would share its resources as well.”

“So where is the Oracle now?” Lion-O asked, still in step with Willa.

“In the care of the Keeper, a historian herself.”

“So, can we ask this Keeper?”

“You cannot, but I can ask Kaleb.” Willa inclined her head to the human male standing in the center clearing just outside of where the largest bonfire burned.

“He is part of the tribe that struck a treaty with the Treetop Maidens.” Lion-O guessed.

“Yes. I will have him ask the Keeper for any information the Oracle may have on you as well as on any other possible Thunderians that have been on the planet.”

“Any information you can find would be appreciated, Willa.”

“I know.” She smiled at the young lord. “I’ll ask, but it must be after the rest of the ceremonies. Go; sit with your companions, and enjoy the respite of food and camaraderie that is Litha.”

Nayda reclined next to Tygra on one of the large logs that had been set up around the bonfires. This was the first time that any of the Thunderians had visited during the festival, and she was eager to see their reactions and interpretations of the many events. She sipped on the glass of honey mead and leaned further against the hard bark of the log. In front of her, stretched two rows of humans. On one side of the line were several strapping young men on the other stood the warrior maidens who wore their hair up in elaborate braids and up-dos.

Tygra shifted his weight so that he was even closer to Nayda and whispered, “So, what are they doing now?”

Nayda shivered silently as the tiger’s soft breath blew across her cheek. She blamed it on the comfortable chill in the air even though it was the longest day of the year and summertime. “This is when the two couples create a formal union and reaffirm our tribal treaties.”

“Do men and women know each other? Were they able to plan to whom they would be pledging?”

“No, before today, many of the maidens had yet to decide. They usually pair up as strangers.”

“So, it is like an arranged mating? Some of the clans on Thundera engaged in preplanned mating, usually for the good of a clan or for keeping a bloodline from being corrupted.”

“Something like that,” Nayda agreed and watched as each couple wrapped a hand around the left wrist of their corresponding opposite member. “But these bonds are not permanent; the couples do not have to be life mates.”

“Ah, yes, that would be different than Thunderian custom.”

Nayda vaguely wondered if Tygra’s clan was one that he had mentioned regarding arranged marriages but quickly quashed the thought as inappropriate especially during the handfast. The two fell into companionable silence as they watched the now conjoined couples jump across the smaller bonfires separating them. The couple spun in the air, joined at the wrists, and landed across from each other three times. On the forth jump, the male wrapped his other hand around the maidens other wrist and pulled her across the fire to stand with him on the other side. By the end of this jump, the smaller fires separated the couples from the observers, creating a symbolic barrier.

A cheer of celebration ran through the crowd of onlookers, and several of the now joined couples engaged in either a modest embrace or a few in rather lustful kisses. Tygra cleared his throat and looked away from the rather exuberant public display of affection. “So this” – Tygra reached up and tweaked a strand of Nayda’s flower infused hair that had fallen from where she had pushed it behind her ears – “is also part of the ritual?”

“It is. The eve before Litha the maidens who are of age and who have not participated in the past three Litha ceremonies choose whether or not to leave the Treetop Kingdom.

“And, you obviously chose to stay.”

Nayda felt her face heat slightly at the appreciative glance the tiger granted her whole ensemble, clothing and hair. She hoped that if he noticed her pink coloring he would attribute it to the heat coming from the still blazing bonfires. She looked to the couples on the other side of the fires as they began unwrapping foil covered packages and placing some kind of confections on wooden sticks. Her eyes caught those of a young man who was watching her intently. Quickly, she averted her gaze.

“Obviously,” she agreed and saw that the same food items were being parceled out on their side of the fire as well.

“Have you ever? I mean before?”

This time Nayda knew the heat that was burning her cheeks must be staining them a dark crimson as well. Her realization was confirmed when Tygra started backtracking from his questions.

“Forgive me, Nayda, that was none of my business. I don’t know what’s gotten into me.” Tygra was saved as Cheetara joined them.

“Tygra, you must try this,” the cheetah gushed and held out a square of something gooey to him.

“What am I supposed to do? Smear it on my fur?”

Cheetara let out a hearty laugh and shook her head. “No, silly, you eat it.” She again held out the square so that he might try a piece.

Tygra obliged and let the cheetah feed him the strange looking but sweet smelling concoction. His eyes immediately lit as he tasted the treat. “By Thundera, that is good!”

“See.” Cheetara smiled in return. “But it is messy.” She leaned over and gently swiped the corner of his mouth with her finger.

Nayda felt her heart jump in a not so good way as she watched the easy interaction between the two friends. She labeled the emotion right away; she was jealousy. *Not that I have a right to it,* she admonished herself and tried to keep a pleasant expression on her face. She swallowed the lump in her throat and broke into their banter. “It is called a s’more.”

“S’more.” Cheetara tried out the odd sounding name and shook her head at the strange noise. “It sounds like a unicorn in distress.”

“Yes, it does,” Tygra agreed and said the word in succession a few times himself. “What an odd name for such a sweet food.”

Nayda shook her head at the two, remembering again that even if they had been on the planet for three years they were still alien to some of the human’s culture. “It is actually a shortened way of saying ‘some more.’ As in, I want some more.”

“Ah ha, well in that case, the name makes perfect sense because, indeed, I do want some more. Can I get you some?”

Tygra shook his head. “I think I’m good. One taste was enough for me.”

Cheetara shook her head right back at him as if to say he was insane before she left him in search of the ingredients to make more of the sweet dessert.

“Did you want any?” Tygra asked, turning back to Nayda. He just realized that he had answered for them both.

Nayda brushed her hand across the tiger's lips just as Cheetara had. She was amazed at how soft the close-cropped fur was. She felt the sudden hitch of his breath as she carefully wiped away the rest of the smudge of sticky marshmallow, chocolate, and honey cracker crumbs. "I think, I've had enough," she murmured and withdrew her hand.

Nayda held Tygra's shocked stare. She couldn't believe that she had been so brazen either, but she knew if she looked down she would be betraying herself, something a warrior maiden, especially a princess, did not do. *It must be the faerie magicks,* she told herself still looking into the tiger's wide russet eyes. She was so close she could see the firelight reflecting making his unusual eye coloring that much more vivid.

Tygra cleared his throat. "Um, what now?"

Nayda jumped to her feet and held out her hand. "Now, we head to the river."

Tygra accepted the warrior maiden's strong grasp and let her pull him to his feet. Cold water suddenly seemed like a very good idea. Even if he didn't use his bolo whip, he thought that submerging his body in the cold River of Despair might be worth it. A Black Widow Shark sighting might be a welcome distraction as well.

He wasn't sure what had happened, but he did decide that he had enough of the honey mead. He should know better than to imbibe a fruited drink. Hadn't he learned his lesson with the silky fruit? As he followed Nayda, her hand still entwined with his, he couldn't decide if he were disappointed that the rest of the revelers were also heading to the riverbank or glad that he would not be alone with the warrior maiden in a secluded location.

Several meters from the water's edge, they stopped to watch three strong men roll what appeared to be a large wheel made of straw and wood to the crest of a hill. After positioning the wheel, the three men stepped back to allow Willa and the male leader – what had Nayda called him? Oh yes, Kaleb – each take smoldering brands and set the straw on fire.

"What are they doing now?" Tygra whispered, feeling the anticipation grow among the members who knew what was happening.

"It is a sunwheel." Nayda paused as she watched her sister help set the now burning sphere in motion. She felt the heat of the massive circle as it rolled past her gaining momentum. "If it goes out before it hits the water, it guarantees a good crop for harvest."

Sure enough, a few feet from the water's edge, the burning mass dissolved and fell into embers on the muddy bank. Nayda let out a squeal of delight and threw herself into Tygra's arms. He

had not been expecting it, but he immediately compensated by wrapping his arms securely around her waist and setting his stance to compensate for the added weight. “I take it the harvest will be bountiful.” Tygra noted trying not to concentrate on the softness of Nayda’s hair as it splayed about her shoulders and brushed his cheek nor notice the subtle fragrance of the flowers decorating it.

“Sorry about that,” Nayda muttered, sliding her legs from around his hips and retuning herself to the ground. “I got a little carried away, but the past three Litha celebrations the sunwheel splashed into the water before going out.”

Tygra only nodded.

“Come on.” Nayda repeated taking his hand and led him to the gathering humans on the riverbank. There settled against the shore were what looked like several hundred, miniature boats. Next to the boats were a pile of fragrant flowers, sheaves of paper, graphite writing utensils, and a smaller fire, a typical campfire size.

“What do we do now?” Tygra asked as he watched the humans take a small piece of paper, write on it, slide it in one of the boats, place a flower with the note, set the mast on fire, and release the flaming vessel into the currents of the River of Despair.

Nayda laughed at the perplexed look he must be sporting on his face and quickly picked up a boat and piece of paper. “These are prayers to the goddess. You write down blessings or even problems with which you are struggling, and send them on their way.” She quickly scrawled a few words – too small for Tygra to make out –and then rolled the paper tightly like a scroll. Carefully, she completed her offering by placing the scroll into the ship like a mast, setting a bright yellow flower in the boat and lighting the paper on fire from a brand from the campfire. Making sure to keep her fingers from the flames, she set the whole ensemble into the river.

“What did you write?”

Nayda smiled an enigmatic smile at him and shook her head. “Only the goddess knows.” She held out her writing implement and a scrap of paper. “Do you want to try?”

Tygra backed away a few steps and shook his head. “I think, I’ll leave this ritual to you.”

A flash of purple and pink leaning down to drop a flaming boat into the water caught his eye. Tygra turned further in time to see Wily Kit gently pushing her offering into the current. He also saw Cheetara set her own boat into the current. They were close enough for him to hear them.

“Kefiera would like this,” Kit whispered and brushed a tear from her eyes.

“Yes, her brother would have as well. I was talking to one of the maidens, and she told me the story behind the celebration. It seems as if this ritual is very much entrenched in the legend of Shu and Tefnut, a celebration of the sun god and the expectancy of the goddess to bring rain.” Cheetara put a gentle arm across the adolescent’s shoulder

Kit nodded and then looked up the riverbank to where the other Thunderians stood. Tygra followed her line of sight to Panthro. The gray panther caught the gaze, turned, and walked away. When Tygra looked back to Kit, he saw the sorrow on her face before both she and Cheetara made their way up to where the others, sans himself and Panthro, were waiting.

He wondered if she and Panthro would ever be able to patch up their relationship or at least move on to one that didn't cause the others around them to feel the desperate strain. He hoped so. Without another word to Nayda, he quickly picked up the paper and wrote on it. He followed her example only varying his by choosing two flowers, one a brightly gleaming orange and the other pure white.

"See, that wasn't so bad. Now" – Nayda pointed to the slowly brightening sky in the east – "time for breakfast to say welcome the official start of summer."

Before following her, Tygra looked back to the river. It seemed as if a hundred candles had been left on the water, each carrying a wish or a thankful prayer. He hoped that the goddess whom Nayda so fervently believed would answer. With the rebirth of Mumm-Ra and the Lunatacs and Mutants on the loose, he had a feeling they would need all of the help they could get.

-Fin-