Past Proceeds Destiny

By Lyngard

Prologue: Distractions

As if it would suddenly cause the chaos to make sense, I stared harder at the mass of twisted wires snarled in and out of different ports of the circuit board underneath the console in front of me. It wouldn't matter if I were standing on my head; everything looked the same. What had Panthro been thinking when he designed this?

I grabbed the technical manual next to me and looked over the diagram trying to decipher what went with what on a schematic that looked nothing like the Feliner II's electrical system. A snarl of frustration crossed my lips, and with force, I threw the instruction text out of the opened cockpit. Predictably, the parched, sandy ground released yet another cloud of dust. The fine particles mixed with those already in the air and stifled any chance of relief from the subtle breeze raised by my impulsive and juvenile temper tantrum.

As with every move I had made so far, my mane fell into my eyes. The cloying sweat on my brow made it even worse. Impatiently, I swiped at the sticking hair. It was a good thing I didn't have Snarf's pruning clippers handy; I was seriously considering shaving all of it off, all the way to the roots. The image of myself as maneless as Panthro did not lighten my mood any; he was mostly responsible for this mess, and I wasn't thinking about the wires this time.

The panther had yet to come to terms with what had happened with Wily Kit or Kitara as she now wished to be referred. I had hoped that time and effort made by both parties would soften the tension, but time had only exacerbated the situation leaving it to fester in silence and creating an ndovu in the room phenomenon.

Not that I remembered ever seeing the large, herbivore bush animals back on Thundera, but the effect was the same – too big to miss especially in a room the size of Cat's Lair's control room or even worse the council chamber.

As if not paying attention to the problem or refusing to address it would make it go away, I fumed silently. They could all look to me as an example of what happened when you pretended that there was nothing wrong. I had been a time bomb, and when I had finally gone off, I had almost taken the rest of the ThunderCats with me.

Well, there would be no running away from it when we completed the rites for Kefiera. Although I had made my promise to the Thunderian lioness's spirit almost three months ago, we had only just recently been able to recover her remains. We had been busy not just rebuilding the machines that Kefiera had incapacitated with her storm-generated electromagnetic fields but also with a not so new threat, Mumm-Ra.

The mummy had finally proven that he was still among the living – so to speak, since I was pretty sure he was still more dead than not. He had been severely weakened by the Star of

Thundera, but rather than licking his wounds in his Black Pyramid sarcophagus, he had chosen to revive another menace to Third Earth. He had convinced the Mutants to release beings, the Lunataks of Plundarr, whom he had trapped, encased in molten lava, long ago near the Firerock Mountains in an area of the Forbidden Territories known as Darkside. Since their reappearance, stepped-up mutant encounters, and Mumm-Ra's ability to now withstand the horrors of his own reflection, we had had little to no time to handle anything other than the constant attacks upon our allies and us.

Bengali's musings about the strange coincidences of so many Thunderians and Plundarrans appearing on Third Earth suddenly echoed in my head. Was he was right; was there some deeper connection? We ended up on Third Earth from damage inflicted on our flagship; the mutants had followed, but he, Pumyra, and Lynx-O had arrived on a Robear Berbil ship, which had also crash landed. Coincidence, perhaps, but what about the Lunataks? They had come to Third Earth long before Thundera was in trouble. And what about Kefiera and her brother or Grune? Things did seem too interrelated to be happenstance. Of course, none of that mattered right now since we were stranded on this unknown, godsforsaken world!

The new Feliner, dubbed Feliner II, had been retrofitted with a new hyperdrive system, which allowed for deep space travel in a matter of days rather than weeks or months. Lion-O and I were on our way back from a maiden voyage taking us out well past the furthest planet of this solar system, but something had gone wrong. We both had seen the flash of light and felt the ship shudder before we had lost all electrical power as well as navigation. Suddenly, our simple test run had resulted in an emergency landing in a system that looked nothing like the one to which we had been returning. We had also ended up too close to a planet, and with no controls to fix the degrading orbit, we had been forced down onto this world.

It was a testament to my skills as a pilot that our manual landing had kept the ship intact. Although I had needed the lion's extra strength to pull the nose up during the very hot descent, I had set us down relatively smoothly on an expanse of dust-choked ground.

Well, there was no other terrain around us, so I couldn't take credit for the flatness of the area.

At least, we had found a planet – more like planetoid with the size of this place – although, in retrospect, it was probably the same size as Third Earth. The gravity seemed different though. Things felt heavier here, but I couldn't be sure if that was from my lungs working overtime or a true difference in the planet's gravitational field.

Although composed of a higher ratio of nitrogen to oxygen, the atmosphere was breathable and capable of sustaining us enough so that we wouldn't have to use the bulky containment suits. However, the difference in the air quality was definitely noticeable. If I did too much or moved too quickly, I felt like I had stayed too long in Panthro's hangar bay with all the vehicles running and the hangar door closed.

I shook myself from my thoughts. They would not help me in the repairs. I needed to get the navigation computer back online so we at least had some idea of where we were. I rechecked the wiring, feeling for breaks, searching for damage, and making sure that all of the connections

were intact. Nothing looked wrong, and the voltmeter showed that the battery still carried current. Still nothing happened no matter what I tweaked or what I tried.

“Bah! This is impossible!” My hands slammed against the opened partition. Finding no satisfaction in the tingling of my fingers, I turned away from the machine. I was done. Lion-O would have to take a go at it if we ever had a hope of reaching home again.

Sighing, I pulled my hair off of my sweaty neck. “Where in the cosmos is he anyway?”

Silence was my only answer. I hadn’t expected a verbal reply, so I looked up at the flat horizon. There was little relief in the geography and even less in color. Brown swirling dust carried on a hot breeze as far as the eye could see. A layer of brown even muted what might have been a bluish sky peeking through darker layers of what looked like more dust clouds. Even the foliage, assuming that was what the shadows in the distance poking from the ground were, was a shade of brown, coated by the grime that seemed to be my constant companion.

“How long does it take to reconnoiter a perimeter anyway?” My hands settled against my hips in annoyance, and I again searched the area for anything that wasn’t brown, sorrel, or umber.

Too frustrated to continue working on the maimed computer system and afraid that doing so would cause more damage, I finally decided to set off in the direction the lion had headed almost two hours ago. Securing the cockpit, I jumped down onto the dry earth. With each step I took, I could feel the heat pressing against me, helping the dirt that scoured the air to further imbed itself into my fur.

My irritation at my circumstances chafed me more so than the debris taking permanent residence in my skin. No matter where I looked, I could find no telltale flame of red or even a hint of turquoise from Lion-O’s uniform. It was as if he had vanished. The subtle anger that had been simmering from the lion’s long absence congealed into worry.

In my preoccupation looking for my companion, I missed a step and fell ungracefully to the dry earth. Luckily, I suffered no injury other than a blow to my ego. Grateful that no one was around to have seen my misstep, I attempted to stand. There was no rumbling to indicate an earthslide or a quake, but the ground beneath me suddenly lost all of its cohesion and began pulling me bodily downward. Like the water going down a drain, I began to spin within the imploding cavity.

I was trapped in what must be some kind of sinkhole. There was nothing below me to slow my descent nor was there anything to grab onto to pull me out of the vortex. Desperately, I clawed at the tumbling dirt but found no purchase. As the murky daylight above me disappeared, I wondered if drowning in sand was the same thing as drowning in water.

In claustrophobic darkness, I felt the dust creep into my lungs and tried to cough out the substance. My efforts only succeeded in drawing more of the cascading earth inward. I continued to plummet, my body bouncing through the debris field. At least I think I was moving downward; I was so turned around by now that I didn’t know which way was up.

I finally came to a stop, hard. “Kutar baicha!” I hissed when I found enough of my voice in my winded and abused lungs to make a sound. “So much for cats always landing on their feet,” I growled to myself.

Prostrate and unmoving, I lay on the ground for a moment. I wasn’t quite willing to tempt fate and possibly start another precarious descent. The journey to this place, wherever that was, had been worse than trying to teach Wily Kat to drive.

Testing my limbs to search for injuries, I slowly moved each leg and then each arm. There were subtle aches, but nothing appeared to be broken. I was sure, with time, I would be quite the sight riddled from head to toe with multicolored bruises. That was, of course, assuming they could be seen under the fine coat of dirt completely covering me. I could even taste it, gritty like wet sand.

I coughed trying to rid my lungs of the collected dust and spit out dark colored sputum. Lovely. My chest ached with the effort, and I hoped that it was only an indication of inhaling too many solid particles and not because I had bruised a few of my ribs in my topsy-turvy fall and abrupt landing. Knowing that lying in a disheveled heap would do me no good, I pushed myself to my knees. My chest again protested. I guess I should be grateful that I had survived as well as I had.

My new position gave me a different vantage of where I had landed, and I had to blink against the brightness above me. Even though it wasn’t possible, since I was technically underground, there was a bright blue sky and a sun – or something that acted like one. The angle at which the rays hit would have indicated mid-afternoon had I still been Third Earth bound.

I looked down trying to adjust to the intense light. Beneath me spread a beach of pure, white sand. It sparkled brilliantly, but it was oddly warm, instead of an expected blistering hot, against my knees and palms.

The sudden variations in color saturated my eyes, which had grown accustomed to the drab browns from the world above. A few meters on the beach beyond where I knelt was a shimmering turquoise cloth. It contrasted vividly with the stark sand. However, it was not attached to the Thunderian for whom I was looking.

Before my mind could jump to dire conclusions, the sound of splashing drew my attention to the body of water stretching out past the beach and to the horizon. I was momentarily captivated by how water and air seemed to meld together flawlessly. The water was a striking blue-green and smooth as glass except for the waves made by a certain Leo.

I stretched my right arm sweeping it over my head and then scooping it sharply down the full length of my torso. The cool resistance of the water against my body as I glided forward fluidly was refreshing. I felt the strain and stiffness in my body drift away and along with them half of the planet that I had brought along with me on my trip to this strange oasis.

I had no idea how long I had been here, but every attempt I had made to return to the surface so

far had been met with failure and a lot more dirt to cover the newly won scrapes and bruises I had received for my efforts. By the time I had decided that maybe there was another way back, other than the tumbling route that had brought me here, I had been covered from head to boot in grime. The debris had matted my mane and drifted into my nose and mouth. I was pretty sure it had even managed to find its way inside my ears too.

The serene blue-green water had beckoned to me, promising relief from the heat and a way to easily clean up. As soon as I had submerged in the lukewarm sea, I had felt at peace, revived. I had only planned to get in and then get out, but the water had felt so good that I had kept reneging on the promise I had made to myself to return to the beach. Just one more lap had become a dozen, and after that, I had simply stopped counting or making the promise.

From the cloudless blue sky, a sudden dirt devil formed close to where I had been dropped. As quickly as it had appeared, it vanished leaving a heap of dirt on the sandy shore. I had already witnessed this phenomenon occur several times now. In fact, trying to go up through the vortex had been my first attempt to return to the surface. Of course, all it had landed me was more dirt to add to the collection I had brought with me.

Oddly, after the earth from above landed here, it morphed into sand and spread out as if it had always been part of the beach. This time, however, as I watched the brown transform into a white dune and begin to disperse, something solid was left behind. The object moved, but it wasn't until the figure stood up that I realized that the form was female, Thunderian female.

"Ho, Cheetara!" I called, raising my hand out of the water in a half-wave. Wet droplets scattered from my fingertips creating miniature-rippling circles around me. Although the water I was swimming in looked like an ocean, there were no natural waves. Everything was still, resembling a placid lake instead.

Her arms crossing over her chest, Cheetara focused on me. "Is this what you've been doing the whole time I've been trying to fix the Feliner?"

Uh oh. I suddenly wondered how long I had been gone. It hadn't seemed like much time had passed. Making sure to put a chastened look on my face, one that usually worked on Snarf, I swam little closer to shore. She was so covered in grime I could barely see the butterfly markings on her face.

"Well, I fell through some sinkhole and wound up here. I had no way to reach you, and the water looked so inviting. Besides, I was hot and dirty." *Hot and dirty! Had those words just left my mouth?*

Even though Cheetara was far away from me, a fact for which I was suddenly grateful, I could see her amber eyes narrow on her dirt-streaked face. She inclined her head to the shoreline a few meters from where she had landed. In a fairly neat pile lay my tunic, claw shield, and the Sword of Omens. "And, it didn't occur to you to use the sword?"

"Look, I know you're angry."

“Angry? Angry! Oh, I am more than angry. You left me to deal with the mechanical nightmare of the Feliner alone.” She changed the pitch of her voice as she mimicked the last words I had said before going off to explore. “‘I just want to reconnoiter the area, Cheetara; I’ll be right back.’ It’s been over two hours!” With each word, she stepped closer to the shore so that her feet almost touched the water.

“Has it been that long?” I stopped speaking as I watched Cheetara throw her hands up in the air. *What in Thundera had gotten into me? Was I trying to start a fight?*

“Come join me.” I invited, mentally changing tactics. The water had soothed me perhaps it would her as well.

Cheetara took a breath and held it for a moment before blowing it out through her clenched teeth. “We’re trapped on an unknown planet, stranded below while our vehicle above is incapacitated – unable to even send an emergency distress beacon, and you want me to take a dip in the pool?”

“Well, when you put it like that…”

“How else should I put it?” It was obvious she was trying to keep herself in check and not fly off into a rage, but her tone of voice was laced with so much sweetness to counteract her anger that it made my teeth hurt.

Frustrated with my inability to defend myself, I smacked my arm hard against the surface of the water and then watched in horror as the large wave that I had created crashed over the cheetah. Where dirt had once marred her lovely features, now muddy tracks covered her from head to toe. Her bright orange colored clothing and vibrant yellow mane with black spots contrasted starkly with the muted dark streaks of mud and splotches of the lighter dusty browns that had not been doused in my splash.

“Cheetara, I’m so sorry,” I gasped as I watched the shock on her face darken to unreadable emotions. I began to back away from her. At first, I moved slowly, but after she threw her weapon cuff on top of my belongings and then knelt down into a crouch, I began to put in much greater effort. Using every muscle in both my arms, I threw myself into a desperate backstroke, swimming as if my life depended upon it, and given what I had just witnessed on Cheetara’s face, it very well might.

Even though I was keeping my eyes on the lithe female in an attempt to save my own skin, I still couldn’t help but marvel at the effortless grace she exhibited as she launched herself into the air. Her lean muscles contracted and then sprang forth in full extension as she cleanly split the water in a seamless dive that barely broke the still surface.

I was definitely in trouble. While Cheetara’s speed was unmatched on land, she was also incomprehensibly fast in water. I may have beaten her in the trial of speed, but I had had time and space on my side. In my current circumstances, I had no hope of outdistancing her. Even as I continued to paddle backwards, I braced for an impact that didn’t come.

Cautiously, I eased up, my momentum slowing until I came to almost a complete stop. The water was crystal clear, but even as deep as I was, I could make out the sandy floor. I was deep, too deep to reach the bottom. I began treading water and looked back to where I had last seen the cheetah. Nothing – no shadow underneath nor current above – gave any indication of where she had gone.

"Cheetara?" I called out. Dread clamped icily across my gut when the cheetah didn't break the surface. Fear for my safety from an angry she-cat was quickly replaced by worry that something had happened to her. In this place, we both had been witnesses to as well as participants in traveling to other "worlds," for lack of a better term. Was it possible that the water harbored a wormhole to another place on this odd planet?

Ten sharp spikes knifed into my shoulders. I barely had a chance to catch half a breath before I my whole body was plunged under the water. Attempting to dislodge whatever was on my back, I twisted. Unsuccessful in breaking off the attack, I changed tactics and clamped my hands around whatever was assaulting me, so it had to come below the surface with me.

We seemed to be in an endless fall until my feet finally hit the sandy bottom. Wasting no time and in desperate need of oxygen, I bent my knees and pushed hard. Like a blaster rifle shot, we flew to the surface. I emerged first still carrying my assailant on my back. Using my mass and momentum to my advantage, I flipped us, turning the tables.

Two blows landed solidly against my diaphragm. The counterstrike caused me to choke on my own breath as the air entering my starved lungs was simultaneously expelled from them. My grip slipped and without hesitation, my opponent took advantage of my weakened state and escaped. Not sure if I would have another chance, I decided that a strategic retreat to shallower waters was in order and threw myself into another powerful backward glide.

Laughter stopped me mid-stroke. "Well what do you know," Cheetara spoke between giggles, "you're right; a dip in the pool is exactly what I needed – refreshing and entertaining."

I stared at the spot where Cheetara was. "That wasn't funny," I growled irritated at how winded I still felt and worse sounded. At least I had come to shallower waters and could now touch albeit on the tips of my toes. "You scared me half to death."

Cheetara shrugged her shoulders slightly and ran her hands through her spotted mane. "Now you know how it feels." With a couple of powerful strokes, she swam her way to my side.

I took secret pleasure in noticing she still had to tread water. "Point taken."

"Did you really try to get back to the surface, or were you just goofing off the whole time?"

"You know, the last time I shirked my duty was right after we crash landed on Third Earth, and I was still a boy coming to terms with my new body. I think I have more than made up for that shortcoming." After everything that had happened in the past few months or before when she had

remembered about the twins, I couldn't believe that she thought so little of me now.

"You've been pushed pretty hard, Lion-O, especially with Mumm-Ra and the Lunataks, I wouldn't blame you for seeking a little R&R, but I am glad to hear that I was mistaken."

I wasn't in the least bit appeased by her words. I was – hurt. I had come to think of the cheetah differently. We had learned so much about each other with each other that I thought we had grown beyond the mental age gap, but apparently, that had also been all in my head.

"What's with you?" A playful splash caught the side of my cheek and shoulder, but I was no longer in the mood and turned to swim back to shore – back to finding a way to the surface and home to Third Earth.

"Lion-O?"

I kept my course.

"Lion-O, come on. Don't be like that." I heard Cheetara following behind me but decided not to give in and look at her. The sooner I got dried off, the sooner I could find us a way home. I had almost reached the beach when I heard an odd sound behind me. I closed my eyes wearily; she just wouldn't give up. I turned around prepared to handle the she-cat, but to my surprise it wasn't Cheetara sneaking up on me. A large tentacle whipped from the water toward my head, I dodged falling down in the process.

"Lion-O!" Cheetara screamed a second warning.

I rolled sideways attempting to evade another feeler from some kind of transparent floating ball. The water I was standing in was waist deep and made my motions seem sluggish and sloppy. Searing pain spread like fire down my right side as another appendage connected with my carotid artery. Half of my upper body went numb, so did both of my hands as I pried the tentacle free of my skin. I fell to my knees as what strength I had, born of adrenaline, vanished, and in morbid fascination, I watched another pair of whip-like arms reach for me.

A primal scream echoed off the shore. I saw a flash of yellow and orange attach itself to the relatively unprotected top of the fleshy body of creature that was attacking me. The arms that had been reaching for me recoiled and twitched in spasmodic jerks. Cheetara, digging her claws into something that resembled a huge Third Earth jellyfish, was the last thing I saw before my knees gave out, and I plunged face first into the water.

I held my breath as best as I could but even that was an effort. The splashing and struggling between the cheetah and the alien pushed me further into deeper water. My chest ached, lungs screaming for air but none to give. I hurt all the way through; it was as if I could feel my spine compressing with the lack of air. My sight dimmed at the corners, but I was paralyzed. I could do nothing but lay in the water. Slowly, the pain began to ease. I saw images flash before my eyes: happier times with my father, with the ThunderCats, with Cheetara. Suddenly, the pain completely disappeared, and all I felt was pleasant numbness as I floated away.

Soft lips, hot breath, and uncontrollable hacking were the sensations that woke me from my stupor. Wracking coughs accompanied by huge volumes of water spewed from my lips as I was suddenly thrust to my side. Every time I thought I might catch a breath, more water would get in the way, and I would have to force it from my lungs and stomach. I didn't even register the feel of warm arms as they wrapped me from behind in a tight embrace.

"Chee…Chee-ta-ra," I gasped out between coughs and gulps of air. My whole body was shaking although oddly I could only feel portions of it. The warm sand felt good on my side, and I rolled onto my back again. I was exhausted and unable to keep my eyes open.

A sharp blow struck my left shoulder and forced me to open my eyes in surprise. "Don't you ever do that to me again!" Cheetara pushed herself to kneeling and glared down at me, but there was something else behind her eyes.

"Sorry," I muttered feeling my eyelids grow heavy again.

"Lion-O!" A sharp sound of a slap rang near my ear, but I didn't feel the blow.

"Hmm."

"Open your eyes!"

I struggled and managed to comply by cracking one to squint up at the cheetah, who had now positioned herself so that she was straddling my chest. Had I been more aware of what was going on, I might have been embarrassed by our closeness or even worse, aroused – well that wasn't worse but well right now it wasn't something I should be thinking about anyways. I managed to coax my other eye open and stared up into her face.

She must have been out of the water for a while. Her mane was curling as it cascaded over her shoulder, a waterfall of ancient gold set off with black. The tension in her forehead eased slightly as both of my eyes continued to stay open. Her mouth softened from the hard line of worry, and she leaned back slightly. I had the urge to reach out and touch her, but when I tried to move my left arm, I found that I couldn't.

She saw the panic in my eyes. "What is it?" she soothed leaning down and stroking my cheek with both of her hands. *Thank the stars I could feel that.* It kept me from completely losing it.

"My arm. I can't move my arm"

Cheetara placed her hand on mine, but I wouldn't have known if I hadn't seen her do so. Slowly, she tracked her fingers upward. "Anything?"

I shook my head. I was afraid that my voice might betray how unsettled I truly was.

“It’s okay.” She reassured me with a smile and again stroked my cheek. I relaxed. Cheetara repeated the same steps with my right hand. When she reached my elbow, I found that I could feel her claws lightly scraping against the grain of my coat.

“I felt that!”

Relief flooded her face, and she smiled back at me. “That thing” – she motioned to the water – “probably injected you with a toxin. When I pulled you from the water, I saw these little barbs all over your neck and arms. I managed to scratch them off though.”

She sighed and leaned back. “You might lay off the candy fruit muffins; you weigh a ton.”

I laughed. It was a wheezing sound, but it felt good all the same. Cheetara joined in, and we both reclined on the shore enjoying the moment, releasing the tension. “Thanks,” I said as our mirth came to a lull.

“Don’t mention it. You’d do – have done – the same for me.”

That admission sobered me. We hadn’t had time to talk about what had happened in the cell when Kefiera had captured us. I felt my face heat with my thoughts. “Cheetara.” I didn’t have a chance to say anything else.

Fingers threaded through my mane as Cheetara brought her lips to mine. She was tentative, questioning, as she brushed my lower lip with hers. I would have given just about anything to be able to move my hands and grab her around the waist or pull her down and roll so that I was on top of her, but I couldn’t. I could do little more than part my lips in invitation.

She tasted so sweet and spicy at the same time. There was the subtle tang of ocean water. Her tongue slid across mine, dueling, giving and taking, a sensuous tango. Fire burned through my loins, desire hot. Slowly, she pulled away, and again I was held captive by my own body unable to keep her from retreat. Burning golden eyes stared into mine.

“Lion-O. Lion-O!” The eyes had changed to a burnt orange. Hands that were too large and too masculine shook my shoulders. I blinked and blinked again to see the gray face of Panthro staring at me.

“Wha? Huh?” I shook my head trying to recapture the beach.

“Thank Jaga, Tygra, he’s back.”

I peered over the panther’s shoulder to see the tiger gently shaking Cheetara from her chair, which was positioned adjacent to mine. In her lap was an odd contraption that looked like a helmeted visor with an array of wires snaking from the back of the device. I looked down at my own lap to find the same thing. A sharp intake of breath redirected my focus back to the cheetah.

“Easy,” Tygra murmured as Cheetara jerked away from him. Confusion took the place of fear on her face, and she turned to me. Our eyes met; hers were still like the molten gold I had just seen. A hint of red stained her cheeks, and she quickly lost my gaze.

“What? What happened?” she asked, her breathing hitching with suppressed emotions.

“I was hoping you could tell us,” Panthro replied. I caught the strange look that he exchanged with Tygra before he continued. “You both handled the flight simulation perfectly, and then when it was over, you both seemed to be in some kind of trance.”

“Did you see anything?” Tygra asked Cheetara, as she pushed her chair away from the console.

The cheetah’s eyes skittered to mine before she returned to look at Tygra. “No.” The answer was more forceful than necessary. “I-I have to go.”

“Cheetara,” I called out, but she was already out the door before I could say anything more.

Tygra looked at Panthro and then at me. “What was that all about?”

“I have no idea.” I answered, but I certainly wondered if she had seen the same things that I had.

TBC

Chapter End Notes:
----------Notes/Sources/Translations----------
ndovu – elephant, Swahili origin.
Kutar baicha – Bengali origin, translated to English. Used as a Tigris swearing, means son of a b***h.]