The New King

By NoWhere_Man

Chapter 1

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During the events of 'Ramlak Rising'

"Duty"

It's a little over an hour before dawn's first light and the sleek, lithe form of the Thunderian Cheetara could be seen prowling around the camp. Silent and agile, the cleric Huntress continues one final circuit of the sleeping grounds, maintaining the vigil of the last watch.

The cool serene forest almost seems to contribute to the woman's prowess this morn, providing just enough shadows so she always could remain hidden. Always having a tree nearby for when she needed an overhead view to spot a potential threat. Even the twigs along the ground seemed to partway during her passing, enabling her to move quick and quiet as death itself.

It is only after another twenty minutes of thorough surveillance; before she is finally satisfied that the Lizards won't find them this morning. In a few hours the other members of her party, the last remaining Thundercats, will awaken and they would begin again their quest.

Cheetara moves back towards camp settling down in front of the fire pit. Only a few smoldering embers rise from the dying hearth, meaning some more firewood would be needed soon if they'd ever hope to have a warm breakfast this morning.

Briefly her crimson eyes scan the slumbering forms of her campmates. The Cats she's slowly getting to know more and more each passing day. Instantly her heart warms as her gaze falls over the two sleeping Wilykittens. Wilykat, just like his namesake had all four of his limbs sprawled across his disheveled bedspread. The young Cub looked as though he was caught midway in a life or death struggle with his blanket…And the sheet was winning. Meanwhile his sister Wilykit seemed to have appointed Snarf as her honorary teddy bear.

Cheetara noticed that the cubs' own camp had grown suspiciously closer and closer to their own as each night passed. She had to admit she was dismayed, the first day when they departed from Thundara, when Lord Lion-O had refused to allow the cubs to join them. Granted it didn't deter the rascally kittens in the slightest, deciding on their own to follow the group anyway.

True the road they were travelling was going to be teeming with danger and there was no telling what perils they may face in the upcoming days. But Cheetara knew that a big part of her heart would have died that day if they truly abandoned the children to fend for themselves. Now she had to admit that she was happy that since that day Lord Lion-O hadn't commented on the duo's continued presence.

Her eyes drifted away from the kittens to a larger form that was sleeping, the other Royal member of their band, the adopted Prince Tygra. She cringed while looking at the tiger at rest. If he *ever* learned to refrain from speaking his mind at every instant, she *might* have found him appealing. Since they've began their journey there have been many thoughts she's had involving Tygra. Some of them pleasant, many of them weren't. Regardless she cuts off that train of thought. Her appointed mission was far more important than such trivialities.

Her eyes then drifted over to the last member of their group, but all rational thought comes to a screeching halt when she notices a body missing from those slumbering. Lord Lion-O was gone!

Cheetara's thoughts were ablaze for a moment at the implications this could mean, as well as even more questions. *The lizards? How did they find us? Was she lax in her guard duty? How could she fail Jaga this way?* Her first thought was to awaken the others. If the lizards somehow did slip in, they couldn't have gotten far.

Before she set out to shout the alarm, the words from her mentor Jaga suddenly drifts back from memory.

'*When at first you are distressed, **stop**. Allow the waters to calm. Then think child, think.*'

Cheetara paused. Her crimson eyes close while she drew a deep breath. The Cleric slowly blows the air out and with it all the tension and anxiety she was just previously feeling exits with it. When she opened her eyes, she was calm and in control once again. Then her mind went to work.

The young Cleric slowly crept over to her young King's bedroll. She noticed that the area surrounding the spread while wasn't tidy, it also didn't show any signs of a struggle. His bed was undone but not shredded. As Cheetara continued to investigate she ascertained that it would have been extremely difficult to slip inside their camp, kidnap her King and disappear without making a sound, much less not awakening the others. Not impossible mind you, but extremely difficult, almost to the point of unlikely.

Carefully after a little bit more observation, she did notice a light trail leading away from the camp. After examining the trail she realized the tracks leading away were of a single person that was close to her own wayward King's height. Automatically she calmed, believing perhaps the Lord Lion-O simply took a stroll away from camp for reasons of his own, during one of her circuits. Either way, Cheetara was worried and needed to be certain, so she decided to see where the trail led.

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It's less than an hour before the others awaken, yet he is still reluctant to leave. The Sword of Omens glades around him like a shimmering star. Dazzling, a beauty to behold but deadly if approached. With every passing day, he feels more and more at home with the sword. As it's no longer just him and the blade, but a symbiotic entity of fur and steel. But yet still it's not enough.

A river of sweat pours down his brow as he moves. *Tuck! Thrust! A counter spin to defend. Feint right then drive.* His spaulders and chest piece had been stifling, so he removed those hours ago. *Watch, your guard! Tighten up your elbows. Loosen up your stance. Never stop moving.* Stripped down to the waist, claw shield on hand, the Sword of Omens clutched with tightening white knuckles. This was how Cheetara found her King, buried deep in the throes of swordsmanship training with the deadliest weapon on Third Earth.

Puzzled for a moment at the sight, Cheetara then did recall that the other morning when she last held the final night's watch, that she did remember seeing Lord Lion-O approaching from somewhere in the woods that day as well. Seemingly just as up and alert as she. She assumed he had just wanted to get an early start on the day, so she didn't think much of it. But now, seeing the sheer uninhibited determination etched across his youthful face, the speedster Huntress had to admit she was completely taken by the sight.

The poise of his evenly weighted steps, the tight roll of his powerful shoulders as he sent his weapon through each blazing motion, the light sheen of sweat that clung to his sinuous frame. Cheetara was willing to admit that at times she felt that she harbored a certain something for her King. A feeling she still wasn't quite comfortable to name, but seeing him now was something she never encountered before.

'*He strikes like a Cat with deadly intent, the grim dedication of a hunter's focus and purpose,'* she observes. His normally joyous bright blue eyes were are hard and sharp. He looks older, harsher. The similarities between him and the late King Claudus are irrefutable especially in the quake of his rage. She knows it's not any imagery monster that he's picturing. He's already seen the real boogey man and knows its face. Every strike he makes now is against that monster. Every drive, every thrust is aimed at that Demon's heart. She realizes that for Lord Lion-O, this isn't simply sword training. This was preparation for war.

As Cheetara stared in the shade of the tree watching her King in the clearing as he threw himself further and further into his work, she couldn't help but recall certain behaviors she noticed from Lion-O over the pass weeks.

Whenever they made camp, he was always the first to take watch. While travelling, he would always position himself to be in the lead making sure he was the first to encounter any threat that could arise. If a retreat was necessary he was always last, making sure to cover everyone's exit. And while he still didn't acknowledge that the two Wilykittens were allowed to journey with them, but yet he still lessened his portion of the rations so the two were always well fed. Even now when he should be using the time to rest, he was out here pushing himself further and further to his limits. The brunt of the work, every hardship, Lord Lion-O was taking it upon himself to do.

His flurry of movement halted suddenly as a beacon of sea blue eyes stared right into her ruby irises. All thought left her as she was caught in the intensity of his stare. His body just committing a powerful overhead cut that was sure to have split a foe in two, he now had his sights focused on his intruder. A flick of practiced motion returns the Sword of Omens to its knife-sized shape; its Master then sinks the blade into its claw-shield den.

Lion-O never lowers the potency of his gaze to her as he moves, his eyes still trained on her, silently questioning why she disturbed his sanctuary. After another moment passes, he closes his eyes and let the matter fall. His soft footfalls fall across the grass as he leaves to return to camp.

Before he drifted completely by her, Cheetara's hand suddenly latched out, taking his wrist, halting him in his tracks. He looked up to her; the power of his stare returning to her again boring straight into her sadden ruby irises, holding more scrutiny than the moment before.

What could she say? She didn't know. But, all she wanted to do in that moment was comfort him. Tell him he didn't have to press himself so hard. That he had others that he could rely on, others that would work just as hard as he did. But after a moment Cheetara restrains herself.

She stops because the flower of clarity suddenly blossoms in her mind and she realizes that this was his right, his duty. Lord Lion-O was Thundara's last King and if he didn't force himself beyond his own limits there would be no else who would. A heavy burden was placed on his shoulders, one she wasn't sure if he could endure. But it was a burden he must bear alone and no else can take it from him.

A warm smile spread across lush red lips greets Lion-O's boring stare. A rare smile that is both accepting and knowing, one that is shared between few friends. A momentary look of uncertainty crosses her king's face, not to mention a faint hint of blush that stains his cheeks. For just a few seconds his eyes return to the boy that she remembered. For a few seconds he's just Prince Lion-O again.

But in an instant the spell is broken and the moment passes.

She watches as his broad shoulders retreats back towards camp, leaving her alone in the forest. Cheetara remains there for a bit longer as she comes to a decision. If this was the level dedication Lord Lion-O's duty was driving himself to, the only thing else she could do was simply follow him. So after a moment she did.