Chapter 34 of Signal in the Sky

Your Ghost

By Purrsia Kat & Spaced Angel

In the world beyond the Cats' Lair, life continued as it had always done. Rain fell steadily onto the luckless people below, damping their clothes and ruining their tempers. Flowers bent under the deluge and nodded their colourful heads to the incessant rhythm of the downpour. Today was rain, but tomorrow would be sun and sweet breezes. The seasons were turning, and the never-ending cycle of birth and death would continue as it had done for many millennia.

Only in Cats' Lair had time stopped. The seconds had thudded round until that moment when the unthinkable had happened and Lion-O died. Since then, time had been suspended, waiting for that act of release to let life in again. Today that waiting would come to an end. Today life began again.

From his position by the window, Tygra looked out on the rain-soaked world and watched droplets of water chase each other down the pane of glass. When one had run its race, another took its place. Such is life they seemed to be telling him. Nature abhors a vacuum; a space must always be filled.

The space left by Lion-O would have to be filled. Not physically, as if anyone could wholly replace all he had been, but as his successor. Ultimately, that role would one day fall to his son, as it had been with his father. The difference was that old Claudus had still been there after he had handed over the Lordship of the Thundercats to Jaga. His son had not been fatherless, at least not until the great Exodus. Beforehand, Lion-O had understood why his father had made this decision and when the time came for Lion-O to take the reins he was still very young but yet, older than Leon was now. That had been pushing it under a pretty dire set of circumstances, Tygra admitted, even with the physical aging Lion-O gained on the journey.

After much discussion among the solemn Council without the children present, they'd decided to spare the young cub the responsibility. Not that the boy seemed too worried about that end of things. Leon knew only that his father had been there one day and gone forever the next. He was aware that he was in line to be the next Lord, but if it weighed on the child or disturbed him, it certainly wasn't vocalized. If he understood, it was only in terms of his loss and the stunned silence in which he endured it. Perhaps one day, Leon would learn that it had been less a decision than a desperate choice his father made. Seeking alone a way for his family and friends to be reunited with their people on a faraway world, all with their consciences clear was a fateful move none of them could undo. That goal still lay in the future after some obstacles were overcome, but for now, all Leon knew was the grief for a father he would never see again.

If his were the most visible, then there were other, unspoken kinds of loss. Tygra saw it in Felina's eyes, the grief for the loss of a partner. Although he was aware the couple had long since abandoned any sense of intimacy, he knew too that they had salvaged enough from the ruins of

their relationship to cement a new alliance as friends, bound together in a common purpose for their children. She said she was coping, but all in the Lair had heard the sound of sobbing in the dead of night and had borne witness to the dark circles that bruised the skin below her eyes. Grief for the partner she had lost cut her deeply, perhaps more so than for any other member of the Lair. She had come to know a different side of Lion-O and had enjoyed a level of familiarity to which few of them had been privy. She mourned a companion, as much as any lover, and the loss set her apart from the others in the Lair. Furthermore, Tygra mused, she was no doubt frightened at the prospect of raising the twins without Lion-O there to lend a hand. Of course, the others in the Lair would step up and assist her in any way they could, but everyone also knew in their hearts it would never be quite the same. No one knew what to say to her, least of all how to prepare her for this day. For the first time since her marriage, Felina was experiencing what it was to be truly alone again Tygra figured.

She grieved, as he grieved, but Tygra knew his was not to be shared or given the privilege of revelation. It was borne of more selfish motives and festered with the deepening insecurities that tortured his soul. With Leon too young to assume the position, the Lordship of the Thundercats and ownership of the Sword of Omens had passed naturally to Lion-O's second-in-command. Long ago, Lion-O himself had told Tygra that if anything were ever to happen to him, Tygra would be the new Lord of the Thundercats. This was of course, before he'd produced an heir. However, there had been no doubt about that fact or dispute at the council meeting they had held once the shock of Lion-O's death had passed. Facts needed to be faced, Panthro had said. For the sake of Third Earth and the Thundercats' continued existence on this planet, a successor to Lion-O must take his place until Leon came of age and the sooner the better. That successor had to be Tygra.

For himself, Tygra had been ready to concede to any other member of the council who thought they had a claim on the Lordship. For one thing, it crossed Tygra's mind to select someone younger – perhaps WilyKat or Bengali would be better choices for the physical endurance of their youth if nothing else. Tygra was much older than when Lion-O first made his intentions known for his successor, but then it was astutely pointed out that Jaga was no spring cub when he took the reins from Claudus. Age, it seemed, could be full of advantages as much as disadvantages, which Lynx-O wisely pointed out. Tygra had experience and wisdom the younger Thundercats had yet to fully gain. And so, the others had been in agreement therefore, and it was passed unanimously. Tygra, like Jaga before him, would be Lord of the Thundercats until the rightful heir came of age. He had accepted it but had not passed a night in sleep since.

There were too many variables for his liking. Would he be able to wield the Sword's powers effectively? Would he be able to live up to the example set by others? More worryingly, would the Sword accept him? The agreement of the council did not mean that the Sword concurred. If the Eye rejected him, what then? Could he remain head of the council if judged unworthy or tolerated at all within the Lair's walls? Yes, maybe the chances were remote, but he'd studied the Book of Omens enough with Felina to know the Eye bonded with some better than others, and even still, would not respond at all to others yet. As a Thundercat, he was relatively sure it wouldn't shun him totally, but a weak bond could prove costly. Most of all, the Eye had a strong bond with Lion-O and that was going to be hard to live up to. Their enemies remained as always, unchanged. The Thundercats, on the other hand, had lost one among them, inducted a new

leader, and one that probably would be hindered by being unable to use their most powerful weapon to its full potential. Or so Tygra was becoming increasingly convinced.

These questions and more had driven him more than once from Cheetara's side in the dead of night to seek refuge in work. One of Lion-O's last orders was to build another ship that was going to be spaceworthy as part of his dream to join their countrymen on the new world. It was a reasonable request given they all couldn't pile into the Feliner. But even as he put in long nights on the design after scrapping the idea of simply building a second Feliner, he wondered at the futility of continuing work on the ThunderStrike, as he'd dubbed it on the blueprints. But then again, even if the dream of going 'home' died with Lion-O, they could always use another sizable ship for their own protection given the smaller vessels they'd crafted over the years weren't going to help against the Mutants' various flying ships, and in particular, their Rat Star replica. Vultureman had really outdone himself on that one, Tygra had to admit. But most of all, work kept Tygra's mind focused on something else other than the mantle he would soon take up completely.

He felt wretched and far from the task that faced them all today, that much was certain. Of all days, this was the one on which the others would look to him to lead them through their difficulties. This was the day on which all questions that had nagged at him would be answered. He tried to remind himself that he was a Thundercat in the hopes that it would bolster his pride and self-assuredness, but oddly that thought only made the doubts grow. It was simply something else larger than life to live up to, in a way.

He sensed rather than heard the entrance of another into the quiet room. He did not turn, knowing who was standing behind him without having to see for himself. At least in some things, he could still trust himself.

"We are ready," she said. "If you are."

A small laugh, the release of pent-up emotion, escaped his lips. "I doubt I would ever be ready for what must come, Cheetara."

She came to stand between him and the distant view of the grey horizon, forcing him to meet her gaze. "Why do you doubt yourself like this, Tygra? You are Lord of the Thundercats now."

"Am I?"

"Yes, it was agreed by all of us."

"In name only. In all the ways that really matter, it is meaningless."

"Then you must give it meaning," she insisted. "There is no other to take Lion-O's place."

He shook his head. "Then I am a poor replacement."

“No one is asking you to replace him. As Jaga made the Lordship his own after Claudus stepped down, so must you.”

“I am not Jaga, Cheetara.”

“I know,” she said, reaching out to take his hand in hers. “You are Tygra, the man I fell in love with. I believe in you.”

He squeezed her hand tightly, feeling the burn of tears itching at the corners of his eyes. “What would I do without you?”

The tears threatened to spill over as he for a moment imagined life without his love. His heart simultaneously went out to Felina knowing she was living what he was too afraid to finish imagining.

She smiled. “We’ll get through this together, as we always do. One day all this will be but a memory, and we’ll look back and wonder how we coped.”

“I needed to hear you say that,” Tygra said, stooping slightly to kiss her cheek. “I miss Lion-O, but I also hate him for being so stupid and doing this to us.”

“I’m sure he didn’t mean to die, Tygra. Whatever he was doing, he thought it was best.”

He nodded. “I know. I’m still mad at him for being so foolhardy with his intentions, but I’m angrier with myself for these accursed doubts.”

Cheetara stroked his arm reassuringly. “We all have doubts and fears,” she said. “But they should never stop us from doing what is right.”

There was the sound of a knock at the door and she looked to where Velouria stood in the doorway, signing that the others were waiting for them downstairs.

“Tell them we’ll be down in a minute,” she told her daughter, who hurried away with the message. “We should go,” she said, pulling up the black band on his arm that had slipped down to his elbow. “You know what you have to say?”

The briefest of smiles flickered across his face. “Making speeches is one thing I know I can do well.”

“I still say we should have braved the weather and conducted the ceremony outside,” she said with a sigh, glancing out at the steadily falling rain. “Is it safe to perform the Ceremony of Rites inside?”

“Felina is confident that it should be. And in deference to her, it is fitting and proper to hold it inside the Lair. It will be difficult enough without having the ceremony interrupted by Mutants or Grune.”

“Grune,” Cheetara muttered. “This will have made him too confident. Perhaps we can capitalise on that.”

“Or not, as the case may be,” Tygra said. “With confidence comes strength.” Tygra thought he could use a shot of confidence about now.

“And with over-confidence comes arrogance. There must be a reckoning for Lion-O’s death.”

It struck Tygra that what Cheetara had just said might very well have been a large part of what ultimately did in Lion-O. Everything in moderation was old advice, but also good advice, he mused. “Within the bounds of the Code of Thundera.”

“Naturally,” she said. “How could it be otherwise?”

Tygra sighed. “Lion-O wished it so once.”

She nodded. “He made his choice, and this is the result. We either live by the Code or we do not. We cannot pick and choose to adhere to its principles when it suits us.” A sudden chill made her shiver. “I’ll be glad when this day is at an end. The day is bleak enough without this infernal rain."

“You’re cold?” Tygra asked.

The atmospherics in the Lair were preset to maintain a moderate temperature and he had not detected any perceivable loss of warmth. Reaching for her cheek, he found the skin cold where a moment before it had been warm. Even the coldness of the day could not chill one so quickly.

"Are you all right?" he asked with concern.

“It’s nothing,” she said dismissively, turning to leave. “Come, let us do what must be done.”

Before she moved out of reach, Tygra caught her arm, forcing her stop. “Cheetara, it was something. You shivered. Is it your sixth sense?”

She gave him a look of annoyance and he guessed he had read her change of mood correctly.

“What is it?” Dread nagged at his soul, and he held her gaze unflinchingly as if challenging her to deny what he sensed.

She shrugged. “Do you remember all those years ago, those dreams I used to have?”

“About an impending tragedy? Yes, I remember.” The enormity of what she was saying struck him. Losing Lion-O was certainly tragic, but if the feelings were returning to her now, it didn’t bode well for the rest of them. “Have they returned?” He tightened his grip on her arm. “Cheetara, if you sense trouble, you must tell me!”

She pulled free of his grasp. “Is it any wonder after all that has happened?" She held his gaze for a second before looking away. "I find myself questioning whether I could have done something to prevent his death. What use are my abilities if they give me vague warnings of things to happen so distant in the future?"

"Death has always been a possibility for all of us, Cheetara."

"Yes, but this..." She trailed off into silence, thoughtfully chewing on her lower lip. "This was so intense, like that time I saw Lion-O holding Jonca when she was a baby. It was as though their fates were bound in some way. Now this has happened to Lion-O, I find myself wondering what else my dreams were trying to tell me."

As much as he longed to ask if those dreams included him, he feared what her response might be. He already had doubts; to hear them confirmed would only serve to shake what remained of his battered self-confidence. And if he knew Cheetara, she would lie to spare him the torture of self-doubt. Better not to ask, he resolved. Either way, he would not like the answer.

"Perhaps they will leave you again, as they did before, once this day is behind us," he said, offering her the support of his arm. "Jaga knows these last few days have been a strain on all of us."

"Especially for Felina and the twins," Cheetara concurred. "Velouria too. I noticed she has seemed more withdrawn of late."

"It is to be expected," Tygra said as they turned into the bedroom corridor. "Has she spoken much to you about what happened?"

Cheetara shook her head. "She has not spoken of it once. When I have asked her, she has been reluctant to confide in me. Although that too is to be expected, I suppose," she said with a smile, acknowledging their daughter's advancing years. "It seems like only yesterday when she was a baby in my arms."

Intentionally or not, the reference reopened old wounds. He could hardly blame Lion-O's recklessness when his own had caused his daughter's loss of hearing. Lion-O had sought to protect his family; he, on the other hand, had brought only harm to his. That was the way he still saw it anyway, despite Cheetara’s reasoning in the past that it was not his fault he ended up on the island or that the Thunderkittens brought her along with them when they thought they were needed. She liked to call it ‘one of those things’ and sweep it under the rug in favor of moving on, but Tygra was never quite able to let go of the guilt. Nor could he quite get over the fact that he could build something like Cats’ Lair and yet, fail to make an adequate hearing device for his stricken daughter. It was another mark against him, another nail in the coffin of his ailing confidence. At this rate, he told himself, the Sword of Omens would be sure to flatly reject him.

He had to wonder if this morbid introspection was designed to cause failure before he had had a chance to prove it in the field. By setting himself up to fail, was it to prevent further disappointment when it really mattered? If so, it did not sit well with the Code of Thundera that

the Sword of Omens was pledged to uphold. If there was dishonesty in his actions, then how could the Eye of Thundera ever answer his commands?

It was one thing to fail, but another to give up without trying. If Cheetara's fears held even a grain of truth, the Thundercats would be in need of a leader who believed in himself and the power of the weapon he carried. Greatness had been thrust upon him, though he had never asked for it or sought it, yet now it was his for the taking. Lion-O and Jaga had made it seem so easy, even though they too never asked for the position, often eagerly taking on the role. Natural born leaders, perhaps, and Tygra couldn't help but feel he lacked their boldness and being somewhat shy didn't help. But the others looked to him to lead and so he must however onerous the burden. In doing so, he knew he could fail, but no one would ever be able to say he had not tried. He was not Lion-O and he was not Jaga, but he was a Thundercat and he'd been given a job to do. It was as simple as that, and overanalysing it from every angle did not a single one of them a shred of good, Tygra resolved finally.

He let out a relieved sigh upon finally coming to that conclusion.

"You're feeling better," Cheetara said suddenly, rousing him from his thoughts.

He wondered for a moment how she knew and, before he could ask, she smiled.

"Don't worry, I can't read minds yet. I just noticed that you feel different, stronger even, as though you have reached a decision about something." She quickly appraised him. "Have you?"

"I can only try," he replied. "All that is asked of me is that I give of my best."

She nodded. "That is all we can ask of anyone and of ourselves. If anyone can hold us together now, you can, Tygra. Panthro will stand with you whatever the odds, as will I, and the younger members respect you. You will lead and we will follow. We will be a team again, strong in our faith and our joint vision. We're survivors, Tygra. We got through our world falling apart around us and we will get through this."

He brushed a stray lock of hair from her face, savouring the warmth that had returned to her cheek. He wasn't the only one adept at making a speech, he decided. "First we must heal the wounds of the past," he said. "Then we must move forward."

"Together," she affirmed. "Going on, persevering…it sounds cliché I know, but I do believe it's what Lion-O would have wanted for us above all else."

"Then let us do what must be done. Come, we have kept the others waiting long enough. It's time to say our last goodbyes to Lion-O and say hello to a new era."



Despite the pain, Grune felt as though he'd worn the smirk on his face for days. He remained in keeping a low profile, letting his strength build before going for the spoils of his victory over the Lord of the Thundercats. But the most important part was done, finally. Lion-O, the cub Lord, was put in his place – his final resting place – and all a credit to Grune.

He and that boy jackal sat tucked in a cave just beyond the hills of Trolls and Giants, waiting out the rain and the battle wounds. It was fortunate in more ways than one that Grune had come across the boy after all those years, he mused. Jax was older but Grune found, still easily controlled through fear. Thanks to the boy's coerced help, in fact, Lion-O met his end sooner than Grune had planned. It was Jax that tipped him off to Lion-O lurking in the area, the trap was sprung, and the rest was, as they say, history. Jax had also helped keep the other Thundercat, which neither of them had noticed until Grune already had Lion-O teetering on the precipice of oblivion, from interfering until it was too late.

It was before all of that happened that Grune thought to try another tack on Jax. Fear was an easy motivator, and got him to come along with Grune initially, but Grune could see an evolution in the boy and thought maybe it might be better to foster a kinship between them. Jax would be taken under his wing, Grune decided, for he was going to need someone he could trust when the real fun began, and that left out any of the hooligans that populated Castle Plun-Darr. Mumm-Ra had not been heard from in the better part of a decade. Jax, he realized, was starved for genuine acceptance and attention, yearnings that Grune could relate to on some levels. And yearnings he could surely use to his advantage. Jax may not be powerful, but like many of his kind, he was fast and cunning when he had to be, and it never hurt to have at least one ally. Sure enough, the manipulation paid off since applying it shortly after he came upon Jax in the forest outside the Lair, culminating in the boy coming through when Grune most needed it.

The bonus reward in this, Grune realized, was that it was highly unlikely Jax would switch his loyalties back to the Thundercats. Not only had he confided in Grune Felina's rejection of him before, but he'd helped destroy the Lord of the Thundercats. If the Thundercats didn't want him around before, they'd never suffer his presence when they learned what he'd done. Or at least, Grune would be sure to mention should he ever sense that Jax was conflicted or overcome with nostalgia. And that was how Grune wanted it. He wanted to be the boy's only hope, the soul he looked up to for guidance, shelter. The jackal teen was his for the molding. Jax's help in the demise of the Lord of the Thundercats sealed the deal and bonded the mutant to him for good.

Everything worked out better than Grune ever imagined. Sure, it had taken years, countless failed schemes and attempts on Lion-O's life, but he'd finally got him. The small fact that the Sword of Omens was left behind was of little consequence to Grune now. Without Lion-O to wield it, to which Grune even had to admit, he had a stronger than usual bond with the mystic weapon, the Thundercats were at a distinct disadvantage. It was all only a matter of time until he could make his next move.

One thing the years had taught Grune was patience. Let them keep their tin sword. Let the one called WilyKat live to tell the horrors of Lion-O's last moments. Let them mourn their Lord's

passing in peace. Even let them choose one to take his place. All of that mattered little to Grune now for he was sure with the hard part out of the way, the rest of his vengeful dream would be easily realized. He would break their wills before crushing them beneath his boots, of this he vowed. Yes, once he and Jax healed from their ordeal, the remaining Thundercats were in for a world of hurt they likely never fathomed.

And those are the thoughts that made Grune keep right on smiling his crooked, one-saber smile. He looked over at his new charge, who was leaned up against the cave wall and snoring loudly. His gaze moved to the cave opening and the rain fell in sheets of grey outside. It was almost as if the skies wept for the darkness that was about to swallow up Third Earth, like the heavens knew what was coming and were powerless to stop it.

Grune's grin broadened.



He had searched in the usual places and even in some of the more unusual places, and still he could not find Lion-O. There were easier ways to locate a lost soul; the Astral Plane had ways that those initiated into its secrets could use for their own purposes. Jaga, however, had always tried to resist the lure of entirely falling into the embrace of this place. Those who did lost themselves and became one with the ether, forgetting all they had been and all they had loved. Lion-O had likewise resisted crossing over completely, despite his earlier willingness. He'd changed his mind, not quite ready to let go of what he'd known before and spent the days since wandering aimlessly between worlds.

One day, Jaga resolved, he would take his place amongst that elect number that left the old world behind and with luck, have Lion-O join him. But while he could remember what it was to breathe sea air or savour the scent of a wild flower, he would cling to this mockery of a life long-passed and conduct his search in his own way. He had not left Lion-O to fend for himself when the young Lord was still alive, and he would not abandon him in the Astral World either.

Convincing Lion-O that he had forsaken the mortal world for this plane of shadows and ineffable energy had been difficult enough; convincing him to accept his new existence and live as he, Jaga, did was proving impossible. Lion-O would vanish for long periods and, when Jaga could no longer sense his soul's presence, he would know that his charge had once more slipped back into the world of the living to dwell for hours amongst friends and familiar places. Then when the strain of his unnatural existence proved too much, he would limp back, exhausted and frustrated, to spend equally long periods recouping his spent energy. Jaga himself had never been so foolish, even though, yes, he too hung on in an in-between sort of existence. But it was not out of an inability to accept his fate. No, Jaga knew when he refused suspension on the journey to Third Earth what his fate would be and had reconciled with it long before the end actually came. He chose to cautiously linger in the misty nothingness only to occasionally appear to Lion-O and guide the lad. He'd been wise enough to not linger too long. Rather, he'd simply make his point before slipping back into the proper realm. Lion-O, on the other hand, died quickly and in his

prime resulting in his soul's unwillingness to accept it all, his heart overwhelmed with a sense of unfinished business left to complete back among his living cohorts.

These were early days, but Jaga knew this yearning to return to the life he had lost would lead Lion-O down a road that would alienate him forever from the safety of the Astral Plane. On his visits to the mortal realm, he had encountered those who had chosen to live as shadows of their former selves. Shadows indeed they were, pitiful souls, drained to the dregs by an existence endured in vain to recapture what was gone forever, knowing only misery and despair that fated them to repeat the same mistakes over and over again. The elders had spoken of the Astral Plane as a place of forgiveness and peace. Yet of all the facets of this benevolent world, hope was the cruelest. All had tasted it, and all came to know by degrees that invariably it was false. Lion-O had yet to learn that lesson and Jaga knew it would take time. However long, he would be there for him when that realisation occurred. That was, if he could find him first.

It was obvious that if Lion-O was nowhere to be found on the Astral Plane, then back with his friends was where he would be found. On this of all days, Jaga despaired for his charge. He had tried all sorts of distractions to keep him occupied and Lion-O had feigned interest. But, just as the cub he had been was poor at deceiving his old tutors, so was the grown Lion-O unable to conjure up an adequate level of interest. Jaga had half-expected him to return to Third Earth and his timing could not have been worse.

He was there of course, exactly where Jaga had expected him to be. Light cast through the rain-marked windows left moving shadows on the floor of the great foyer of Cats' Lair, where Lion-O's friends had gathered to pay their last respects. A bier had been set up in the centre of the chamber and to this Panthro, Lynx-O, Bengali and WilyKat were processing, bearing on their shoulders a stretcher with a cloth-covered body. Kat struggled somewhat with his share of the burden thanks to injuries that had not yet healed completely, but he bore it stoically, dutifully. They laid their burden on the bier in silence and retreated to a respectful distance, where the women and children already waited along with Snarf.

For a long time, all that could be heard was the gentle patter of rain on glass, as though Third Earth was crying over the loss of one of its adopted children. Then, Tygra spoke, shattering the stillness, forcing the ceremony to begin.

"Fellow Thundercats," he said gravely. "We are gathered here today to bid farewell to a lord, a leader, a father..." He paused for a second to give what he had to say emphasis. "And most of all, to a dear friend. Above all things, that is how I shall remember Lion-O. That is also what I shall miss the most. In time, we may one day know other lords and follow other leaders, but I will never know another like Lion-O. He was courage when we were afraid. He was strength when we were weak. He was a friend when we were most in need."

The strain was starting to tell in his voice, and he had to clear his throat.

"I do not pretend to know the workings of the Astral Plane, but I believe that although we commit to the care of the ancients his physical form this day, his soul will endure with us forever." His gaze inevitably moved to where Felina stood, Leon and Jonca standing on either

side of her, their hands tightly squeezing hers. "One who cared so much for those he loved will never forget them, as we will never forget him."

"Never," muttered Panthro under his breath.

"We will now observe the Ceremony of Rites," Tygra said, "as has been the practice and tradition of our forebears. Felina?"

In silence, she freed herself from the clinging hold of the twins, passing their care to a bereaved Snarf, and made her way to the lectern that had been set up at the foot of the bier. Waiting for her was the Book of Omens, the appropriate page marked ready for her to read the proscribed passage. In a clear, steady voice, she repeated the words of the Ceremony that would commend Lion-O's physical remains into the care of the Book for all eternity, speaking a tongue borne and shaped from the earliest days of Thundera's history.

Watching the group around her, Jaga observed that, although they listened with respect, the meaning was lost on them. Even on his granddaughter, though a student of the ancient tongue, was too distracted to follow the eloquence of the language. But Tygra’s lips moved in silent sync to the words Felina spoke, comprehension evident in his demeanor. Then finally came the last line, which Felina spoke in a language familiar to all.

"Of the stars are we born and to the stars we return," she said. "Thus, is the circle of life complete."

The heavy cover of the Book thudded shut on its own accord as she finished speaking. The Ceremony complete, all that left was for the Book to fulfil its role. Gathering it up into her arms, Felina carried it over to the shrouded body and waited as Tygra drew back the covering. Jaga had never been prouder of his daughter than as he watched her before the body of her dead husband, composed and unshaken by the ordeal that was streaking the cheeks of the other members of the Lair with tears.

With the greatest of care, she lifted Lion-O's arms and placed the Book of Omens on his bare chest, putting his hands, palms down, on its cover. With equal reverence, Tygra laid the Sword of Omens on top of the Book and both withdrew several paces. Power recognised power. Sword and Book met in a glow of light that shone between them like the birth of a newborn star. It grew and washed out over the still body beneath it, like the ebb and flow of an ocean wave, gently bathing Lion-O’s physical remains in a brilliance that seemed to dissipate all it touched.

Slowly, he was dissolved until all that remained was a host of shimmering stars, waiting for release from their worldly prison. The Book gathered all unto itself and both book and sword fell onto the flat surface of the bier with a dull thud. There had been no fanfare, no wailing for a fallen leader. The last rites of Lion-O, Lord of the Thundercats, had known the silence from which was born the universe. The Ceremony was at an end and from somewhere in the Lair Jaga was aware of the ticking of a clock, marking each second that moved time on and away from the sad events of this day.

All around him the Thundercats once again moved and murmured amongst themselves, ignorant of his presence, but Jaga could no more leave than could Lion-O, still as a statue in his corner. As much as Jaga had wished to spare him, perhaps this had been what Lion-O had needed to finally acknowledge what Jaga had tried and failed to tell him. He had witnessed his own funeral and the horror of what he had been forced to understand still showed on his ghostly face.

Jaga waited as the hall emptied out and silence reigned once more, leaving a place inhabited only by himself and Lion-O. The elder Thundercat waited for him to speak, neither rushing him nor attempting to put words into his mouth. If change had occurred, it needed Lion-O to communicate it, not for someone else to mitigate the event. And, finally, as Jaga knew he would, Lion-O found his voice.

"I'm really dead, aren't I?" Lion-O said, sounding like that small cub Jaga had known all those years ago on a far distant planet called Thundera. "There's no going back now, is there?"

"No, Lion-O. There never was."

"I hoped..."

"We all do."

"I thought this might be a nightmare. I kept thinking I would wake up and all this would be a horrible dream. But it's real, isn't it?"

"Reality is what we make of it, Lion-O," said Jaga. "Is this world real? Has anything that has transpired here today actually happened? Or like Tygra, have you created an illusion to satisfy your need to give substance to a world without form?"

Lion-O shook his head. "But if none of this is real, what is?"

Jaga smiled, seeing the first signs of understanding in his charge. "You are, Lion-O. Change is inevitable, that is the only certainty in this reality. But what you are will always be. Lion-O will always remain, if not with you, then with your friends and your wife and children."

Lion-O's eyes drifted back to the empty bier. "Felina," he whispered. "She was so brave and so alone. I wanted to comfort her, but I did not know how. If only..." He pursed his lips and squeezed his eyes tightly shut. "If only I knew a way to tell her how much I loved her. I have tried, Jaga, but she does not hear me."

"Because you are gone from her reality, Lion-O."

"As were you in mine," countered Lion-O, "but I saw you often, when I was most in need. Jaga, Felina needs me now and I cannot make her see me. I have tried so hard. Once I thought Jonca could see me, and sometimes I see Cheetara react when I am there, as though she is aware of my presence. If they can sense me, why not Felina? How did you do it?"

There it was again, cruel hope, waiting to be dashed. How to tell him that ability would always be beyond his grasp while he clung to the mortal world? Ironic really, that what Lion-O so craved could only be gained by giving up what he desperately wanted.

"You are not ready," said Jaga gently. "Such abilities take time to master."

"Jaga, please," Lion-O said, "teach me how. I have never been much of a student, but this I will endeavor to learn with all my heart. I will try if only you will teach me. I have never begged for anything in my life, but this I do."

It hurt to hear him ask with such desperation in his voice. Death was indeed the great leveler, Jaga thought. The proud were reduced to the level of the pauper and forced to meanly beg for even the smallest of favours. What Lion-O sought was as far beyond his comprehension as the understanding of the simplest of the universe's secrets. But Jaga knew he could not be so hard and unfeeling. Unless Lion-O had some comfort, he would cling to that same cruel hope that trapped so many unfortunate souls in the mortal world in the mistaken belief they could regain that which they had lost.

"What you ask is impossible," Jaga began, holding up his hand for silence when he saw Lion-O's mouth open in protest. "There are, however, other ways which might equally serve your purpose."

"Teach me, Jaga, I must know."

"Then come, Lion-O. You have much to learn."



Hours later, Jonca sat with the other children in the room they all shared, which once served as Velouria’s nursery. Toys were scattered about in such abundance one could barely see the floor. Normally, she knew, Snarf would have none of it but since her father’s passing, the old nursemaid hadn’t been making his usual rounds. Disarray was allowed to rule the day.

Not that her playmates were in much of a mood to play. She was responsible for most of the mess and hummed a bouncy melody as she scooped up two dolls and began playing make-believe with them. Her companions’ somber moods were hardly a hindrance to her and stood out in stark contrast to her upbeat demeanor.

A tug to her arm brought her out of her playtime fantasy, and she looked up at Velouria expectantly.

Jonca spoke aloud the words Velouria signed to her. “How can you play like that? Aren’t you sad about the funeral today? Your father has died.”

Jonca scowled slightly, annoyed that the older child treated her as if the simplest ideas hadn’t occurred to her.

Jonca glanced briefly at her twin, who laid curled up on his bed across the room, but even Leon wore a look that seemed to say that he too, would like an answer to those questions.

Jonca sighed and shrugged. “Mama said he’s in a better place, so why stay sad?” she offered meekly, which she could tell Velouria didn’t believe for an instant.

Velouria shot back a sentiment that if it had been her father that died, she’d never stop crying.

Jonca fought the urge to shove the girl for the signed remark. If she wanted the truth, here it was. “Well, for your information he’s not gone! Now leave me alone.” That told her, Jonca thought with some satisfaction, ready as ever to resume her play.

Leon, however, sat upright and spoke more words than he had in days. “What?”

Clearly, Jonca was going to have to draw them a picture. “I’ve seen him,” she elaborated. “Don’t you? He was there at the ceremony today. I waved to him, remember? I don’t think he noticed, though.”

Jonca had been too fascinated to try to talk to her father’s ghost before, and the acknowledging of his presence by waving shyly to him today was the first attempt she’d had at making a connection.

She’d just assumed that everyone in the room could see her father when he was there. It never occurred to her that she was the only one or that she had to point out his presence.

Velouria regarded her skeptically. *Of course, he didn’t notice, silly*, Velouria chastised, *he’s dead, remember?*

Jonca hated being mocked in, of all things, sign language. Her ire was rising.

“No, you don’t get it. Not the one laying down that disappeared, the ghost one! The one in the corner.”

Jonca looked from one stunned face to another, before her brother broke the uncomfortable silence.

“Liar!” he declared, before storming out of the room.

Jonca felt her own shock at being met with such disbelief. Surely, Leon heard the tales of Lion-O's counsel with their long-departed grandfather. Velouria surely must know the stories too. It only seemed logical that he'd come around and do the same for them.

Velouria waited for Leon to go before making her opinion known. *You shouldn't say such things*, Velouria admonished the girl in sign, *it's a cruel joke to play. Leon's hurting badly enough.*

It was Jonca's turn to feel indignant. She reached over and touched Velouria's face to get the older girl to look at her again. "It's not a joke. I can see him sometimes. He's all see-through and blue but it's him. His ghost. I can't hear him though. It's too bad you haven't seen him – you could tell us what he's trying to say by reading his lips. He keeps trying to talk to mom. He's around her a lot."

Velouria remained still, taking this information in for a moment before asking Jonca, with some hesitation, if Lion-O was in the room with them now.

Jonca scanned their surroundings and found they were alone. "No."

Velouria took to looking around the room, and Jonca could tell her friend doubted her still. It hurt quite a bit to be disbelieved so, but she swore on the Eye she told the truth. Unless her eyes deceived her, she'd seen the form of her father a few times since he died. The idea that she could only see her father was something she'd never considered. She'd taken it for granted everyone else could see him just as easily and took the same comfort in his presence as she did. And now Jonca wondered if any among the grown-ups could see him or if they'd also push her claims aside.



The map of Third Earth displayed on the main view screen showed the irregular blotches of cloud moving steadily away to the west. Tomorrow promised to be a fine day. At least it promised to be a better day, Felina told herself, having come up to the control room rather than spend more time alone in their, or rather, her room. Anything had to be better than the day she had just endured.

The Ceremony of Rites had drawn a final line under their relationship, as if to signify that by consuming Lion-O's body, all trace of him had been removed from her world. That thought had first struck her when she had witnessed his atoms free themselves from his rigid physical form and escape into the other world within the Book of Omens. He was gone, not just spiritually, but in essence too. It was as though he had never existed at all, as though he had been some figment of her imagination, conjured up in some fevered frenzy. She feared that any moment she would speak his name and the others would look at her as though she were mad.

That thought had driven her to their room shortly after the ceremony, where she'd rifled through his clothes and pressed them to her face, breathing deeply to inhale his scent. Even on the newly laundered clothes, he was still there, familiar and strangely comforting. He was there too, in the stray hairs that remained on her brush, which he borrowed when he thought she was not looking to tame his own unruly mane. Felina vowed never to change the way the room was left, in as far as the things he'd left out or undone, fearing if she tidied up his things or packed them up, she'd lose the last worldy vestige left of him. She knew his smell, his peculiar way of folding and arranging things, yet if asked to conjure up his image, his face was fading from her mind. For most of the afternoon, she had lain on the bed staring at his photo on the pillow beside her, trying to remember what it felt like to have him beside her again. She tried to remember his warmth, or how it felt to feel his breath on her skin. She wondered if what Tygra had said during the ceremony would endure, or if with time, everything about Lion-O would also fade including her memories of him.

When all it achieved was to emphasise the fact that he was no longer there to fill that space in her bed, she had sought refuge elsewhere, being helpful where she could. She had found herself helping Snarf to fold washing, as it seemed he too was trying to quash his grief in the everyday routines of Lair life. That done and conversation lacking, she finally headed up to the Control Room, where Bengali was cataloguing weather patterns for the coming weeks. She could tell he found her presence uncomfortable, not through any sense of malice, but because of her loss. It was a feeling she was getting used to, as it seemed few of them knew what to say to her. She felt bad for them when they struggled in vain to find words of comfort and healing. The truth was, there just weren't words. She had tried to put him at ease, as she had during previous, similar encounters. Felina knew she was failing miserably when her best efforts failed to stop his relentless need to say something just to fill the silence with any sort of noise.

It was mostly nonsense, but she found it welcome. Any sound was better than the noisy clamour of her thoughts and by engaging with him in his ramblings, both found a sense of peace until finally they had no good reason to remain any longer.

"Well, I've got to take these down to Tygra for decoding," Bengali explained needlessly, waving the data disk with the necessary information vaguely in the direction of the door.

Felina nodded, trying to act as though this was a revelation to her, despite having done this same task many times in the past. It was important, if boring work. Many people on Third Earth had come to depend on the Lair's ability to predict the coming weather patterns with reasonable accuracy. The Berbils arranged their planting season and harvest according to the Thundercats' information, and in thanks gave to them a fair share of their crops. The sun always shone on the Wollos' festivals and Willa had managed to save over ninety per cent of the trees in the forest that would normally have been lost to lightning strikes. News like that made the long hours of decoding and analysing all worthwhile, but it never stopped it being ultimately tedious.

While Bengali went on his errand, she had promised to watch over the central computer while it made the necessary computations for long distance forecasting. It went about its business like a contented metal beast, chewing over the information it had compiled with a series of whirrs and clicks. Data transfer consuls whined and purred, putting Felina in the mind of some giant cat that

had crept into the room and was about to pounce on her. She twirled in her chair just to be sure, smiling to herself in remembrance of how such silliness would have driven Lion-O mad. Sometimes he could still be too serious. Just before he had died, she'd not heard him laugh in a while. His main concern had been about the possibility of reuniting with the gathering bands of Thunderians on the planet called New Thundera, and it reminded her of how driven he'd been when Bengali and the others were discovered to be out there in the wilds of Third Earth in need of rescue. She also remembered their struggle on Fire Rock Mountain and how several of them, including Lion-O, almost died trying to realize that dream. Lion-O's luck, it seemed, finally ran out with this mission.

Still, it was strange to think so many other survivors of old Thundera were out there somewhere, ignorant of the death of their hereditary leader. They had lived parallel lives for so long, until finally they had touched, and tragedy had followed soon after. If it was always to be so, then Felina was happy to forget any thoughts of finding this home world despite the small bit of guilt born of a willingness to abandon that which Lion-O was so passionate about he died trying to make happen. The others would not give up so easily, perhaps spurred on by a sense to honor Lion-O's memory by going home. She wondered how long it would be before talk of finding a way home returned to the weekly council meetings. About the same time things got back to normal, she guessed, however normal was supposed to feel now. For her, she was sure she would recognise it by its emptiness. The empty chair, the empty wardrobe, the empty bed; all these were fast becoming familiar in her new world and she was aware that she was growing to accept them, faster than she had anticipated.

The children were another issue altogether, and as much as her presence made the others feel awkward, she could relate. Felina found herself struggling to help her children cope, though barely coping at times herself wasn't making it easier. Leon had been far too quiet and sullen, never giving away a hint of what was going on in his heart or mind no matter how much she begged or tried to distract him. Jonca, on the other hand, recently had nearly the opposite reaction. She seemed uncharacteristically upbeat for just having lost her father, and Felina had no idea how to deal with either child's emotional needs.

But then no grief could last forever. Not hers or theirs. Already, she knew the memory of grief and she had no urgent desire to revisit that painful initial feeling. Its ache had dulled to bearable levels, so much so that she had been in control of herself more than she had expected to be during the Ceremony of Rites. It had been a strange feeling, almost as though she was watching herself at a distance performing a role. She had moved and had spoken the words of the ritual, and was aware on some level that it was indeed she who had done those things, but it felt as though it had happened to someone else in another place, in another reality. Someday, she supposed she would get used to the feeling. Until that time, she felt strangely dislocated, like an alien being in inhospitable surroundings, listening to a voice that sounded so like Lion-O's, repeating her name over and over again. At least she could remember the sound of his voice. But suddenly she questioned if it was memory or…

Snapping out of her reverie, she realised that the voice was not a figment of her imagination. She could hear it still, sounding indistinct and muffled, like someone calling from a great distance. Out of boredom, she had been fiddling with the Lair's radio frequencies, half listening to the idle

chatter of the local galaxy. She had left it tuned to static and through the hiss and crackle had come the voice. Turning up the volume, she listened to the faint message. A second later, she was yelling for the others.

Cheetara was the first to reach her and Felina did not give her the time to ask what had happened to cause such a reaction.

“I’ve heard him!” she said. “He’s here, listen, in the static on the radio.”

“Who, Felina?”

“Lion-O. He’s calling to me. Listen for yourself.”

Cheetara gave her a doubtful look. “Felina, Lion-O is dead. There is no way he can possibly be on the Lair’s radio receiver.”

“He is,” she insisted. “I swear on my honour as a Thundercat. I heard him, repeating my name over and over. Listen for yourself.”

She turned to the radio, hiking the volume up to its maximum limit. Now it was her turn to doubt. The airwaves were filled with static, the remnant sounds from the birth of the universe finally penetrating this distance from its epicentre after millions of years. Frantically, she adjusted the frequency, trying to recapture his faint message. It was gone, like he was, just a ghost of a memory of what had been.

“I don’t understand,” Felina said, dropping into the nearest chair after lowering the volume in defeat. “I was sure I heard him.”

Cheetara’s hand came to rest on her shoulder. “This has been a trying day for all of us, Felina.”

“You think I imagined it, don’t you?”

Cheetara shook her head. “I believe that *you* believe you heard something. Whether it was Lion-O or wishful thinking, I cannot say.”

“It sounded like him,” she replied in a small voice. The grief she thought she had contained was burning itself across her emotions again, tightening around her throat and bringing hot tears to her eyes. “I want him back, Cheetara. Is that so wrong?”

“No. If there were a way, none of us would hesitate in trying to restore him. But it cannot be. He is gone, Felina.” Her hand slid under her arm and she gently guided Felina to her feet. “You need rest,” she suggested kindly.

Felina bowed her head, although Cheetara’s mentioning of restoration lit some vague idea in the back of her mind. Something in the Book, some kind of way, her conscience nagged. But then, blinded by grief and an impossible hope, Felina dismissed it as more imaginings from an

exhausted mind. She was tired and in sleep there was a kind of refuge. She allowed Cheetara to take her to her room and settle her in the bed, as meek as any newborn kitten.

“Sleep is a great healer,” she said, dimming the night light to a faint glow.

“I did hear him,” Felina reiterated.

Cheetara nodded. “We will talk of this tomorrow. Rest now.”

Felina obeyed, letting her eyes close and the peaceful embrace of sleep smother her sorrows. She dreamed of a time past, of a challenge she and Lion-O had accepted together, of a bed that had broken and the first kiss they shared. For a time, he seemed so real she was able to touch him again, to remember the latent strength in those hands equally capable of great tenderness. His voice came to her dream, speaking her name. He stood apart, no longer a part of moments past, but as a departed soul that was reaching out for her and she went to him. Close enough to touch, she stopped and gazed upon the face she would never see in her world again. He smiled and she knew he had come back for her.

She went to him, eager for the comfort of his embrace, but beneath her feet the ground began to shake. Around her, the Lair was crumbling and in the midst of it all, Lion-O was calling to her. Large pieces of masonry threatened to crush her, and she ran out into daylight to be greeted by the sight of Grune, laughing at her. The noise was deafening, enough to drown out all other sounds, enough to drown out Lion-O. He grew fainter and fainter, until she could no longer see him. Tears damped her cheeks as she ran back into the ruin of the Lair to find him. He was gone, leaving the place to dust. A small fragment of paper drifted down to her hands, falling from where he’d been before.

She called his name and was still calling it when her eyes opened to a dimly lit room. It took a moment for her to separate the dream illusion from reality and a second more to realise she had never left her bed. It had been a dream, powerful enough to cruelly deceive and to leave its mark in her sweat-soaked sheets.

The tears had been real enough, and she went to wipe them from her cheeks only to find a scrap of paper clutched in her hand. She remembering catching it, but surely that had been just a dream?

With trembling fingers, she pried its crumpled edges apart and found it was a torn note, scrawled in Lion-O’s untidy handwriting. It was brief and to the point.

“Felina, I love you. We must live apart, but I will always be there for you.”

She stared at it, remembering the first time she had read those words. In the early days of their difficulties, Lion-O had taken to leaving these little notes for her to find. She had kept some of them, like this one, and if memory served, it had once had more to say about working together to raise their children. Since then, someone had torn it, removing the parts that were no longer relevant.

She guessed it was probably Cheetara, in a kind, but misguided attempt to give her some sense of comfort. If anything, it only served to show her just how foolish her fancies had been. She *had* imagined his voice through the static, just as she had imagined him coming to her in her dreams. Grief could do strange things to the mind. That and a lack of sleep, she told herself. All she had to do was to shut her eyes and it would all go away.



The crumpled note passed through his body on its way to ending up in a corner of the room. Lion-O watched helplessly as Felina turned her back on his best efforts to communicate and pulled the bed sheets up and over her head. He willed her to look again, but soon her body fell into the slow, rhythmic breathing of sleep and his chance had passed. Exhausted beyond reason, he sunk down beside the wall and buried his head in his hands.

He had tried, just as he had tried to make her hear him over the radio. It had taken all his strength to find that note and leave it for her to find. Her unconscious mind had been too tormented for him to maintain his link with her for any great length of time. Jaga had promised him that with practice and in time, he would become stronger. Until then, he had to be patient and not spend so much time haunting the halls of the Lair.

He was not sure that he could do either.

Hope held him here, with its promises of so much, only to leave him frustrated and empty. If this was the existence of the dead, then he could understand why Jaga chose to remain in the undemanding nothingness of the Astral Plane, cocooned from anything that could hurt or stir memories of mortal life. Jaga spoke of higher planes, where those who could no longer bear to endure their loss went to forget. In fact, he'd been told his father had long crossed over and if he only would do the same, could be reunited with Claudus again. Every person found their peace in their own way, but Lion-O knew he would rather hurt forever and remember than be happy and forget. After how he'd left them, didn't he owe them that much?

In the note Felina had cast away, there had been a promise. However, much it hurt him, he intended to keep it, even at the cost of his eternal rest. Jaga had told him of the peril of remaining attached to the mortal world and of being lost forever, but he could not let that stand in his way. That was a price he would gladly pay, for Felina and his children. He only hoped that they would understand.

Thoughts of his children drove him from his former bedroom and out into the corridor, where he wandered down the hall to the cubs' room. The automatic doors sometimes opened for his ghost form and sometimes they did not. Jaga could never quite explain that phenomenon to him. But this was an instance when Lion-O simply passed through doors that remained closed.

He found his daughter alone, sitting cross-legged amid a mess of toys in the room and entrenched in role-playing her imaginings out with a pair of dolls.

“I don’t care if you don’t believe me,” Jonca had one doll tell the other. “I know what I saw!”

Lion-O wondered what had her so frustrated, when she looked up and seemed to look straight at him, not through him like the others did. In the past, her gaze would linger on him and more than once he thought perhaps she could see him, but then no acknowledgement would come, she’d look away, and Lion-O would once again be left with feelings of frustration and hopelessness.

To his amazement, this time she spoke to him.

“Hi, dad. Your ghost is really blue.”

She *could* see him! He didn’t dare question why only she seemed to be able to see him without difficulty when he wasn’t even trying to do anything particular, other than what Jaga had mentioned before about some children being more attuned to spirits wandering the living world. Perhaps it was that simple. Jonca’s mind was open to it, and so she saw.

Snapping out of his stunned amazement, he approached Jonca and knelt before her. “Can you hear me?” He asked hopefully.

She could be a way for him to get his message to the others given they would believe her, anyway.

Jonca giggled a little in response. “Turn up the volume in the ghost place, dad. I can’t hear you.”

Lion-O’s hopes were dashed somewhat, and his question was adequately answered, although at least she could see him and that was something. At least he had some kind of connection with somebody he loved in this form. As if having to prove his visual presence to her beyond a doubt, he raised his hand up and held it out toward her.

She paused for only a moment before letting a doll fall to the floor to free up one of her own hands to meet his. Her earthly form passed through his ghostly one, however, and her eyes went wide.

“Did that hurt you?” she wondered aloud.

He simply shook his head and she seemed relieved that he wasn’t harmed. A million questions danced behind her eyes, and Lion-O regretted he could not be heard to answer them. Not unless the answer could be told by a nod or shake of the head. However, he was sure that if he said one thing slowly and deliberately enough, she’d get the message.

“I love you.”

To his comfort, she’d understood the words his mouth had formed. “I love you too, dad.”

Just as she spoke the words, her brother came through the door. By Leon's expression, Lion-O thought the boy could also see him. But Lion-O's smile soon vanished as the boy's expression turned to that of disgust and anger.

"Who are you talking to?" he demanded.

"Dad. Don't you see him?"

Leon's eyes blazed with hurt. "Knock it off," he screamed, rushing toward his sister and knocking her over onto her back with a generous shove.

Tears welled in Jonca's eyes and Lion-O wanted desperately to intervene but was powerless to stop the rumble.

"You just stepped on him, doofus," Jonca insisted defiantly.

Her remark only frustrated the boy more. He bared his claws and let out a cry of frustration just before he was about to pounce. WilyKat appeared before any serious fighting could commence, much to Lion-O's relief, likely arriving to see what the commotion was about.

"Hey, you two," Kat said, gaining the twins' attention. As expected, Kat paid no heed to Lion-O's apparition. "What's going on?"

"She's teasing me!" Leon shouted, pointing to his sister who was still sprawled on the floor. "I hate her!"

"Hey, whoa now," Kat said gently. "Everyone just calm down. Jonca, is this true? Are you teasing him?"

"No, I'm not teasing. I really do see dad. He's right there!" Indeed, her finger pointed to where Lion-O stood and despite the fact that he knew the others couldn't see him he smiled sheepishly at them.

Kat glanced in the direction she pointed, but it was clear he saw nothing but a very messy room occupied by two sparring siblings.

"Tell her to stop saying that," Leon demanded, almost shrilly. "She's a big fat liar!"

Jonca, taking exception to the insult, reared her leg back and struck Leon sharply in the shin with her foot. Before Leon could retaliate, Kat deftly scooped the angry cub up in his arms.

"Put me down, WilyKat!"

Kat's hold was firm rendering Leon's struggles useless.

“Listen,” Kat began patiently, just as Snarf sauntered in. “I don’t know what’s going on between you two, but we’ve all had a long day. Let’s not fight among ourselves. Not now.”

The appeal at least seemed to calm the children enough to make the anger die in their eyes.

“Come on,” Snarf said half-heartedly, the state of the room not even making him flinch. “I’ll give you some Berbil Berry pie, Leon. I think I forgot an ingredient or soemthing, but it’s not bad. You too, Jonca.”

Snarf filed out of the room, followed by WilyKat, who had shifted Leon so that the cub held on somewhat piggyback. Jonca went to follow, but turned and smiled sweetly at her father before disappearing into the corridor.

Lion-O stood there, smiling back at her long after she’d gone.

If I walk down this hallway

Tonight, it's too quiet

So I pad through the dark

And call you on the phone

Push your old numbers

And let your house ring

Till I wake your ghost

Let him walk down your hallway

It's not that quiet

Slide down your receiver

Sprint across the wire

Follow my number

Slide into my hand

It’s the blaze across my nightgown

It's the phone's ring

I think last night

You were driving circles around me

I can't drink this coffee

Till I put you in my closet

Let him shoot me down

Let him call me off

I take it from his whisper

You’re not that tough

It's the blaze across my nightgown

It's the phone's ring

I think last night (you were in my dreams)

You were driving circles around me

--Your Ghost, Kristen Hersh