Necessary Sacrifice

By Spaced Angel

Part Two

The Thundertank purred to a halt in the dusty sands of the desert and rumbled its defiance at the mighty edifice before it. In this place where not even the rays of the sun dared to venture, the Pyramid dominated Mumm-ra's forsaken domain, a lonely reminder of evil days when the sorcerer held sway over all of Third Earth. As Tygra glanced up at the lightning dancing around its lofty pinnacle, he found himself wondering for how many this had been the last thing they had seen in this world before taking their final journey into this place of evil. He offered up a silent prayer that the same would not be true for him.

With effort, he forced himself out of the relative safety of the Thundertank and, with the Sword of Omens in hand, walked the short distance to the Pyramid's craggy walls. At his approach, a section of slabs moved apart to allow him to enter. Beyond was dark and shadowy, lit by several fading wall scones that spluttered into life as fresh air drove back the musty stench of centuries. On the threshold between light and darkness, he hesitated, imagining how Lion-O must have felt when he had had to face Mumm-ra in the last of his Anointment Trials, then as now without the comforting reassurance of the power of the Sword of Omens. At least he had it to hand - much good it would do him.

Glancing up at the purple sky, one solace was that whatever the outcome of today, at least his friends were safe, hopefully by now met up with Mandora and the medical ship. Back on Third Earth, his present situation as less certain. Giving the Sword of Omens to Mumm-ra was stupid, he knew that. Although the mummy could not use it for evil, he obviously had something up his sleeve. But to walk away from Third Earth and leave her people to their fate? No, his conscience and the oath he took as a Thundercat would never allow him to do that.

Taking a deep breath, he headed into the gloomy passageway and into the heart of Mumm-ra's domain. Underfoot was crunchy and dank. Indistinguishable lumps of brown fur scurried across his path, while spiders of various sizes slipped out of heavily-webbed corners to gaze down at the stranger in their midst. Unwilling to linger any longer than was necessary, he pushed on, keeping his eyes firmly fixed on the small glimmer of light at the other end that grew larger with every step. Finally the confines of the passage opened out into a gaping space hung with heavy shadows. At its heart lay the round pool of bubbling liquid with its four attendant demons, and beyond, the flight of steps leading to Mumm-ra's last unnatural resting-place.

In his hand, the Sword started to growl. "Steady, nothing here that can hurt you," he murmured, half-wondering whether he was directing that remark to himself or the Sword. Either way, it was a statement in which he had only the barest amount of confidence.

Taking a few steps deeper into the chamber, he glanced warily about. At the very least, he expected a trap. But the Pyramid seemed strangely quiet, as if the evil elements that resided here were unaware of his presence. Yet someone had opened that door for him. He was in no mood for Mumm-ra's games.

"I have the Sword," he called out. "Show yourself, Mumm-ra, or I leave."

A low laugh rumbled from the depths and a cloaked figure dragged itself from the gloom behind him. "So, you have come," said Mumm-ra, an inner glow shining in his eyes. "As I knew you would."

"The Sword," Tygra said tersely, stabbing its blade into the ground. "I have kept our part of the bargain, now you keep yours. Leave Third Earth alone!"

With that, he turned and started back towards the passageway. As he approached, there was a sudden scraping of stones and his ears confirmed what his eyes could not - his escape route was blocked. From the darkness came the four Mutants, weapons itching in their hands and their beady eyes fixed intently upon him.

"You didn't imagine that I would allow you to leave here alive, did you, Thundercat?" said Mumm-ra.

"Whatever you're planning, it won't work," Tygra retorted.

"Are you willing to bet your life on that?"

At the snap of Mumm-ra's fingers, the Mutants started forward. As they fanned out around him, Tygra found himself backing away in an attempt to keep all four of them in his sight lines. The further he went, the more they spread out, and he had to check his retreat before his attention was split completely. The Mutants also came to a halt and glanced at each other, trying to decide who would attack first. Slithe growled at the others, asserting his right as leader to make the first move. He was too confident, however, for even as a smile spread across his lips, Monkian had swung into action. His shield came up, but Tygra was already skating past him, barrelling into a bemused Jackalman and sending Vultureman into a whirl. An agonised cry rose up behind him, telling him that Monkian's blow had not been entirely wasted on Slithe. Even so, he dared not look back. His only hope was to lose himself and the Mutants in the winding tunnels in the Pyramid's depths, and find another way out of this place. His flying feet carried him to within inches of the sheltering cover of darkness, then something hit him solidly on the back, making him lose balance and crash to the floor. Dizziness and confusion cost him his lead and seconds later the Mutants were on him, hauling him up by his arms. Between them, Slithe and Monkian dragged him over to where Mumm-ra stood and forced him down onto his knees.

"Very disappointing," Mumm-ra said. "Did you really think you could escape?"

When he failed to respond, Mumm-ra nodded to Slithe, who obligingly kicked his captive in the small of the back, making him groan with pain.

"You think you're ssso clever, yesss," the reptilian sneered, bringing his mouth close enough to Tygra's ear to allow spittle to dribble down his neck. "You're gonna be one dead kitty when we're finished with you!"

"Let's do him now," Monkian hooted. "Like in the old days, hoo-hoo, when we used to decorate our headquarters with trophies."

"And do you know how it got the name 'headquartersss', Thundercat? Becaussse we put our enemiesss' headsss on ssspikesss outside to warn othersss. I think we ssshould revive that practice, yesss. Jackalman, give me your knife!"

"W-what you gonna do?" he said uncertainly.

"Lily-livered fool!" Slithe roared, snatching the knife from him. "I'll ssshow you how I deal with Thundercatsss! Here, hold him!"

Obediently, Jackalman scurried to take over holding Tygra's arm. Slithe, now with his hands freed, moved in front of their captive and, taking a handful of his mane, yanked his head down. Testing the blade's edge on the exposed skin of Tygra's neck, he pressed it down firmly until a bright stream of blood welled up from the torn flesh.

"A little blunt," Slithe grunted. "Ssstill, all the more fun, yesss!"

As the blade bit deeper into the wound, Tygra squeezed his eyes shut and ground his teeth until they ached to match the pain from his neck. Beneath the dulled metal, tender muscle snagged and tore. Blood streaked down his chest and dripped to the floor. And, as hard as he tried to suppress it, a scream rose in his throat and threatened to slip from between his fangs. Then, suddenly, it stopped.

With the knife was removed and his mane released, slowly, painfully, Tygra lifted his head to see that his unlikely saviour was Mumm-ra, who was ordering Slithe to back down. He complied, although the look of hatred burning in his eyes spoke of his bitterness at being thwarted.

"There will be others, Slithe," Mumm-ra was saying, "but this one is mine." His gaze fell upon the bloodied Thundercat and a nasty smile played across his lips. "I almost hoped you would not come, Tygra. I know potential when I see it and it grieves my old heart that it should go to waste."

"Nothing you could do would ever make me a slave to your evil!" Tygra hissed.

Mumm-ra waggled a finger at him. "Now, Tygra, we both know that isn't true. All you need is the right encouragement. You are but a puppet in my hands!"

"One you underestimate."

"Or one I have *over*estimated!" Mumm-ra countered. "Look at you now, Thundercat, kneeling before your enemy. I had only to threaten a few Berbils and you came running with the Sword of Omens. How pathetic is that! Your goodness is your weakness and it will cost you dearly." So saying, he plucked the Sword from the ground and held it up for inspection. "A truly amazing weapon. I find its duality most interesting. Its inherent need to do good, coupled with the potential for destruction." He stroked it almost lovingly, then grasped hold of the blade. A grunt of pain escaped his lips as he drew his hand down, leaving a smear of black ooze on its shining surface. "Perfect," he murmured, inspecting his sliced palm. "At least it will be quicker than Slithe's blunt knife."

At his words, Tygra looked up at Mumm-ra and saw his fate gleaming in the razor sharp edge that reflected in the mummy's dead eyes. He tried to speak, but his throat was constricted, strangling words that would not come. Raw fear sang through his mind and made a mockery of his resolve. With effort, he fought it down. If Mumm-ra were going to kill him, he would not give him the pleasure of seeing his inner turmoil.

"The Sword cannot be used for evil," he said, finally finding his voice. Even so, doubt tingled at the edges of his mind. Mumm-ra was too confident. Not so unusual, as he never expected to fail. But trapped here like this, Tygra knew that he was far from help and, if not with the Sword... He had to swallow hard to repress the memory of that blunted knife sawing at the back of his neck.

Mumm-ra snorted at his defiance. "As the saying goes, what the eye doesn't see, the hand gets away with." He shuffled to the bubbling waters of the pool and dipped several of his trailing bandages into the liquid. The waters sprang up, coating the crumbling fibres with its unctuousness. Satisfied, Mumm-ra removed the bandages and carefully began to wrap them around the growling Eye of Thundera. The quivering pupil vanished beneath the suffocating material and saw no more.

"The next thing the Eye will see is your blood," Mumm-ra declared, watching Tygra for a reaction. "What? No protests, no assertion of the Sword's infallibility?"

"This won't work," Tygra said. "Even if you kill me -"

"There is no 'if' about it."

"You still won't succeed in driving the other Thundercats to revenge."

"Oh, of course, you're all too honourable for that, aren't you? But who says that is my intention?"

Tygra faltered. He had assumed wrongly, it seemed. "Then what?"

Mumm-ra appeared to grow a little taller, buoyed up by his evident pleasure at crowing his victory over his captive. "You remember the Curse of Balthaz?"

"That when the Sword is used against a fellow Thundercat, it will be destroyed - yes, I remember. And I also remember that we foiled your plan."

"So you did," Mumm-ra conceded. "But my perceptive, if faithless, ex-wife, Almari, has a theory about that. She believes that the Curse of Balthaz relates specifically to the shedding of blood by the Sword - specifically, the blood of a Thundercat - and that this will cause the death of the Eye of Thundera. Interesting, don't you think?"

For a long moment, Tygra stared blankly at Mumm-ra, a terrible sequence of events playing out in his mind. Manipulated into delivering the source of the Thundercats' power into the hands of the enemy, his death would be the first in a long line stretching from here to Cat's Lair.

Seeing his expression, Mumm-ra smiled. "Your fear betrays you, Thundercat. It tells me that dear Almari was correct all along."

"No!" Tygra said desperately. "I won't let you do it!" In a sudden fit of panic, he tried to break free of his captors. His best efforts met with a volley of kicks and the fierce twisting of his aching arms. Then, as he hung limply from the beating, Vultureman came up behind him and wrenched his head back, limiting his movements even more.

Mumm-ra moved over to him and stared down, contempt burning bright in his glistening eyes. "You will die by the Sword of Omens, Tygra, and your death will cause that of the Eye of Thundera. The Sword will be as useless to the Thundercats as it is to me. Then, when your friends return, I will take great pleasure in sending them to join you in your very own little portion of hell!"

"What makes you think they'll come back for me?"

"They would not leave you behind, nor will Lion-O ever willingly give up the Sword."

"If he recovers."

"He will. The effect of the gas should be wearing off about now. And when he returns, he will find a new world here on Third Earth, ruled by Mumm-ra, the Ever-Living!" A cough from Slithe made him scowl. "Make yourself useful, Mutant. Blindfold him," he said, tossing a slither of black material in his direction. "And you, Thundercat, is this how it ends? This surly silence is to mark your final moments in this mortal realm?"

"What would you have me say?"

Thin lips drew back across ruined teeth. "One should always leave something for posterity, some final declaration of defiance in the face of death. Are you so lacking in imagination, Thundercat, that you need me to provide your epitaph?"

Executioner and condemned held each other's gaze until Tygra looked away. Truth rang in Mumm-ra's taunts. In the greenness of youth, death had been something that happened to old cats or came with terrifying swiftness to the unwary. No one had ever said that speeches would be required, some last wise insight into the feline condition or the certainty of goodness over evil.

And with oblivion whispering in his ear, nothing wise or perceptive sprang to mind. Instead, there was only regret.

"May my friends know," he said quietly, "that - I am - sorry."

The Mutants jeered and hooted, but Mumm-ra stood in silence, studying him with interest. "Even now, you think of them," he said. "I'm not sure whether that is noble or pathetic." He motioned to Slithe to continue. "You can tell them yourself. They'll be joining you soon enough to spend eternity with my 'darling' ex-wife, Almari, and her insatiable perversions. Although," he added with a grim laugh, "I may keep the she-cat for myself, if she lives."

Ugly laughter rang in Tygra's ears as his sight was denied. Slithe pulled the cloth across his eyes and viciously tightened the knot at the back of his head. With his eyes bound, other senses took over, making him aware of the stench of sweat and decay, the dampness of the hands gripping his arms, the dryness of his mouth, the pounding of blood in his ears. Every nerve tingled, stretching out far beyond the confines of his body. The faintest movement of air, the crunch of bare feet on the dirty floor, the excited breathing of his captors - all was frighteningly vivid, the more so with imagination left to paint its own pictures in his mind.

Yet the blow, when it came, still took him by surprise. Somewhere in his lower stomach, a flurry of searing pain and cold metal. An age drifted away as the Sword hung in his guts, its blade warming on his split blood, before it was slowly, agonisingly yanked up and out. Without its support and the restraining hold on his arms suddenly gone, he dropped onto the sodden floor. Life melted away with the blood that lapped around him, spreading far beyond the reach of his trembling hands as from his reddened lips escaped a name on his last breath.

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Mumm-ra stood, watching the still Thundercat for some time to be sure that life had departed. In his hand, the bloodied Sword made a faint growling sound. Out of interest, he pulled the bandage from the Eye and smiled as he saw the gold pupil fade into a sea of red, lost in the blood it had split in its blindness.

"So, you are fallible after all," he sneered. Stabbing it into the pool of blood at his feet, he glared at the shocked Mutants with an unfriendly eye. By one of the statues, Jackalman had stopped heaving and was wiping vomit from his muzzle. "You'd better clean that up, Mutant," Mumm-ra growled. "I don't want your stink about the place."

"What about him?" asked Slithe, nudging the still body with his toe.

"Leave him. Something for his friends to find."

"Who would have thought it would have been so easy," Vultureman mused, looking at the dead Eye of Thundera with interest.

"Makesss up for all the yearsss of misssery we've endured," Slithe muttered. "We dessserve thisss."

Mumm-ra's eyebrows rose slightly, but he said nothing and turned and headed back to his sarcophagus. Oh, they would get what they deserved all right, when they were no longer of use to him. Let them deal with the Thundercats, then he would be rid of them and their petty ambitions to rule Third Earth.

"We should go, Slithe. The others will be back soon," said Jackalman.

"Yesss, yesss," said Slithe impatiently. "I know what I'm doing. I don't need a yellow-belly telling me what to do."

"I am not a coward!" Jackalman countered. "It's just that - all that blood and -" His face went an unfaltering shade of green and he gagged.

"He does have a point, Slithe," remarked Vultureman. "Awk, the other Thundercats won't be too happy about this and that's putting it mildly."

"You think they worry me!" the reptilian roared. "Wait till I get my handsss on that cub they dare to call their leader. I'll -"

"Slithe?"

"I'll -"

"Slithe!"

He spun on the quivering jackal, barely missing him with his tail. "What isss it, you be-furred fool?"

"D'you hear that?" Jackalman whimpered.

Slithe cocked his head and listened. For a few seconds, he heard nothing and was about to clout the jackal for his impudence, when he caught the faintest rumble, like approaching thunder far off in the distance. With it came the awareness that the temperature in the Pyramid had risen several degrees.

"What isss that?"

"Hoo-hoo, I'll bet that Mumm-ra's behind it," said Monkian.

"I hope so," said Vultureman. "If not..."

A gasp escaped his lips as his eyes fell upon the Sword. From what had been the Eye of Thundera now leaked an oily red liquid that trickled down the blade and caused the pool of blood on the floor to sizzle. And as the Mutants started to flee, the Eye flared back into life with a terrifying growl.

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He awoke, feeling cold and confused, his muscles stiff and aching. With effort, he pushed himself up and glanced around. The place was familiar, if unexpected. Mumm-ra's Pyramid - what on Thundera was he doing here? Concern made him get to his feet, too quickly it seemed, for his head swam and a feeling of nausea turned his insides to mush. He waited until it passed, then looked about. Strange - he appeared to be alone in this place of silent statues and brooding shadows. Its undead occupant was either at rest or out causing trouble, excuse enough for him to make a hasty exit. He would delve into the question of how he got there when he was safely out of harm's way.

Wishful thinking, he thought ruefully, as to his left, a light suddenly flared, blazing in its intensity. He shielded his eyes, trying to turn away, yet this light was strangely compelling. It called to him in a voice that spoke to his very soul. He could not resist. He went to it, letting its will become his, meek and unquestioning of this wonder.

"Son of Thundera." Another voice, familiar somehow, but alien to this place, suddenly rang in his ears. He tried to ignore it, but still it persisted.

"Loyal Thundercat, honest and true, heed my words."

Something about it made him hesitate. The light, sensing his change of heart, drew back. Fear gripped his heart. What should he lose it? Desperately, he reached for it, unwilling to give up its comforting presence. It was within his grasp, a spider's breath away from his possession.

"Hear me, Tygra."

And the spell was broken. The light withdrew from him, sending him back into the land of shadows. The voice rang again in his ears, biding him to turn, and furiously he spun round to meet this tormentor.

"What do you want of me?" he yelled.

The sight of the figure that stood watching him brought him up short. Not discernibly either male or female, its body was simply a void in which sparkled a thousand pulsating stars, yet which gave out no light beyond their immediate vicinity. Around the figure crackled blue energy, defining the edges of its frame against the half-light of the Pyramid.

"Who - what are you?" Tygra murmured, unable to pull his eyes away from this strange being.

"I am Ensis," said the figure. "Do you not know me, Tygra? Hear my voice and remember."

Something about this faceless creature was familiar. The memory was distant, however, as though belonging to a life lived long ago. "I'm not sure. Who are you, Ensis?"

"I am the energy that fills you when the Cat's Signal shines in the sky. I give to the Lord of Thundera my power to use as his own. Through my eyes, all becomes clear. I am the soul of the Sword of Omens, Tygra. Remember me."

At that, the clouds parted. The memory of recent events came rushing back, tumbling over and over in his bewildered mind and dragging his eyes towards the thing that had once been his body. He stared down at himself, a cold, bloodless corpse on a reddened floor. A violent shiver rippled through him as other memories re-surfaced - of Mumm-ra, the Mutants, of a vicious, searing pain in his abdomen...

"I'm dead," he whispered. "And because of me, my friends are damned. The Sword -"

"Lives yet," said Ensis. "Look."

A low growl rumbled through the Pyramid. A red glow grew from a mere pinprick to outline the shape of the Sword of Omens, still embedded in the ground. Light spread out from it, filling the Pyramid with dancing crimson hues. At its centre, the slitted pupil of the Eye of Thundera regarded the two souls gravely, before returning to its rightful place in the Sword's hilt.

"All that has happened here has been put right, by the grace of the Ancients and my power," said Ensis.

"But how? What about the Curse of Balthaz?"

"Only when the Sword is wielded by another Thundercat to spill the blood of his fellows will the Eye be destroyed. Mumm-ra did not know that."

"Thank Jaga."

"All that remains is for your life to be restored. Except," Ensis added carefully, "I cannot force you. It must be your decision. I do not wield the power of life and death, but I can right a wrong, to restore to life those who the Forces of Evil have taken untimely. You stand on the threshold, Tygra. If you choose to follow the light, then I cannot stop you."

"I understand," he said. "The decision is mine and mine alone." He glanced back in the direction of the mysterious light. It had started to advance again, bathing him in its glow, beckoning to him in voice that promised peace and rest and forgiveness. "I let my friends down," he murmured. "Had things worked out differently, they would all be flying home to their deaths."

"Would you truly leave them now?" asked Ensis. "When they need you?"

Tygra shook his head. "They don't need me. I'm a liability."

"How so?"

"I handed the Sword of Omens over to our greatest enemy!" he retorted.

"And saved your fellow Thundercats and Third Earth in the process. Some would call that noble, that you made a necessary sacrifice."

"Or the actions of a fool. No, they're better off without me. I should go."

"Without saying goodbye?"

A new voice and one that made him turn sharply in the direction of the speaker. She was there, stood a little way from Ensis, cloaked in that same blue glow.

"You aren't leaving us, are you, Tygra?"

He moved over to her and stared deep into her eyes. "Cheetara, what are you doing here?"

"I think I'm dying," she said uncertainly. "Actually, they're trying to save me as we speak, so I don't have much time."

"You were ill," he said.

She nodded. "Yes, I know. I *was* getting better. But then I heard you call me and you sounded so hurt and in so much pain that I had to come. Tygra, what happened? Why are you leaving us?"

He swallowed heavily and looked away. "I let you all down. What I did could have spelt our destruction."

"And so you think you deserve to die? I can't believe you would think that. We need you, Tygra." She moved round in front of him so that he had to look at her. "More than that, *I* need you."

"No, you don't."

"Stop saying that!" she said angrily. "How are we meant to carry on without you, tell me that?"

"The group is more important than any of its members, Cheetara."

"And the loss of any one of those members affects us all. Stop feeling so sorry for yourself and come back to us!"

"You'll get over it," he said. "I'm sorry. My mind is made up. Goodbye." With that, he turned away from her and started towards the light.

"Fine, then go," she called after him. "But if you go, then I'm coming with you."

He stopped dead in his tracks and glanced back at her. "You don't mean that. Go back while you can."

She stubbornly folded her arms and made no attempt to move. "Are you telling me what to do?"

He quickly retraced his steps to where she stood and took her hands in his. "Cheetara, don't do this. The others need you."

"Funny. Now where have I heard that before? Oh, yes, that's what I said to you."

"I'm different."

"How?"

He stared at her, not knowing what to say. He knew that she meant it. Before, he hadn't been able to stand around and let her die, and he couldn't do it now. "There's a word for this," he said.

She grinned, knowing she had won. "Yes, blackmail. Do you really want me on your conscience?"

"Blast it all, you're a nuisance, d'you know that, Cheetara?" he said, returning her smile. "A nice quiet existence on the Astral Plain beckons and you have to spoil it."

"I hear that it's rather boring there this time of year. Third Earth, on the other hand..."

"You aren't giving me much choice, are you?" he sighed. "All right. Ensis, it seems I have to return."

"Then so be it." The soul of the Sword of Omens spread its arms wide and a red glow filled the Pyramid. "Because of what has happened here," it said, "the events of this day must never be known. When you awake, you will remember nothing of what transpired here and nor will any of the others involved. Do not seek the truth, Thundercats. Some things are best left unknown."

An ethereal wind began to whip around them as the light from the stars of Ensis' body merged into one glorious glowing whole. As reality began to tug at him, Tygra glanced down into Cheetara's eyes and gently brushed her cheek.

"If we're not going to remember this," he said softly, "I want to thank you. I really might have gone, you know. I felt so lost."

She gave his hand a reassuring squeeze. "I'm glad I was here to help you find your way home."

"What about you? Are you going to be all right?"

"I think so," she said. "Be there when I wake up."

"Promise." He inclined his head towards hers and kissed her lightly on the lips. "Shame we won't remember that," he said, drawing away after a moment.

"Somehow, I'm sure we will," she said. "But just in case, refresh my memory..."

And she clung to him and they kissed, and all the while the whipping winds grew ever stronger until the red glow died and all was at peace.

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He awoke, feeling cold and confused, his muscles stiff and aching. With effort, he pushed himself up and glanced around. The place was familiar, if unexpected. Mumm-ra's Pyramid - what on Thundera was he doing here? Concern made him get to his feet. Strange - he appeared to be alone in this place of silent statues and brooding shadows. Its undead occupant was either at rest or out causing trouble, excuse enough for him to make a hasty exit. He would delve into the question of how he got there when he was safely out of harm's way.

Over to his right was a patch darker than even the shadows, possibly the opening of a passageway. He started towards it, only to catch his foot on something hard and sharp. The Sword of Omens - now what was that doing here? He pulled it from the ground and continued towards the opening. Pushing himself into a run, before long he was out in the open and covering the short distance to the Thundertank in a few strides. Leaping into the cabin, he noticed the communicator beacon was flashing. Panthro's worried voice came over the airwaves.

"About time too. Where were you?"

"Oh, er, I'm not sure," he answered. "What's your status?"

"We're on our way home. Lion-O's back to his old self and Cheetara's going to be all right. It was touch and go for a while, but she pulled through. What's been happening on Third Earth?"

Tygra hesitated, unsure what to tell his friend. His mind was a blank. A few muddled memories were returning of the events prior to going to the Pyramid, but what had happened when he got there was a mystery. Perhaps it would come back to him. Perhaps he would never know. Only time would tell.

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He sat by her bedside, holding her soft hand in his, waiting. Her breathing had become shallower in the last few minutes and wakefulness could not be far behind. His patience was rewarded with the slight twitching of her eyelids and finally her eyes opened.

"Morning," he said, giving her hand a light squeeze. "Good to have you back in the land of the living."

Cheetara's gaze fell upon him and she smiled wearily. "Hi. How long have you been there?"

"Not long," he lied, knowing that half the long night had been spent at her side, willing her speedy recovery. "I have had other things to do, you know."

"Of course. I didn't doubt that for a moment." She tried to move her free arm, but had to stop and visibly winced at the effort. "Ouch," she muttered.

"Ouch indeed," he said. "You've got a nasty injury there. Do you want something for the pain?" She nodded. He took a bottle from the bedside table and poured a little of its liquid onto a spoon. "Open wide."

She took it in one gulp and pulled a face at the taste. "That's horrible! Is that the best you can do?"

"The worse it tastes, the better it is for you, so they say."

"And who are they exactly?"

"Well, me for one."

She smiled at his teasing, but then a darker, more troubled look came into her eyes. "What happened?"

"That's what we'd all like to know." The door had opened just in time for Lion-O to catch her question. He came into the room and sat on the edge of her bed. "How are you feeling, Cheetara?" he asked.

"Tired," she said. "And pleased to see that you're back to normal."

"I'll say. That is one experience I do not recommend."

"Well, now we know what to get you for your nest birthday," said Tygra. "You were very taken with that colouring book."

"Knock it off," Lion-O growled good-naturedly. "At least I do remember, which is more than we can say for you."

"You can't remember what happened?" Cheetara asked.

Tygra shook his head. "Nothing. I have this blank in my memory. One minute Panthro was leaving Third Earth to take you and Lion-O to Control's medical ship, the next, I woke up in the Pyramid."

"Mumm-ra's Pyramid?" she gasped. "By Jaga, are you all right?"

"Yes. As to what happened... I just don't know. I guess it will come back eventually."

"Perhaps it's better if it doesn't," she said. "Some things are best left unknown."

He looked at her, experiencing a strange sense of d?j? vu. "Why do you say that?"

"I'm not sure, it just popped out."

They stared at each other for a long minute until Lion-O roughly cleared his throat and broke their reverie. "Yes, well, Panthro says that the Mutants don't seem to remember anything either - he had a run-in with Monkian when we got back and I believe him when he says he was telling the truth. Nor can the Sword shed any light on what happened. All it shows me is a fuzzy image. I think it's telling me to mind my own business."

"Sounds like good advice," Cheetara said.

He returned her smile and wearily got to his feet. "I have to go," he said. "Thanks to the Mutants, there's lots to do on Third Earth today. Coming, Tygra?"

"In a minute."

Lion-O nodded and left the room. Cheetara watched him go, waiting for the door to close behind him before she reached over and took Tygra's hand. Her bright eyes held his, seeking there answers he was unable to give.

"Are you sure you're all right?" she asked.

"Well, I seem to be in one piece, mind, body and soul. What more can I say?"

She withdrew her hand and squeezed her eyes tightly shut. "I had a terrible feeling about you. I can't quite remember it now but..." Her eyes opened again and Tygra noticed that they were full of tears. "It felt like you'd left me. I couldn't bear it."

"Silly," he gently chided her. "Where would I go? From what I hear, you were the one who left us. Panthro said they almost lost you. Apparently, you were clinically dead for several minutes."

"Strange, I don't remember," she said.

"As you said, that's probably a good thing. Now, stop upsetting yourself and get some rest." He patted her hand and smiled for her. "I have to go. Duty calls - as always. But I'll be back later."

"Will you?"

"I was here when you woke up, wasn't I, just as I'd promised?" The words came out before he realised what he was saying and brought him up short.

Cheetara gave him a curious look. "You did? When?"

"Must have been before you left for the medical ship, I guess," he said slowly, trying to grasp the vague memory that slipped from between his mental fingers. "Well, it doesn't matter when I said it, as long as I was here." Something else danced on the fringes of his mind, just a vague impression, an impulse almost, and to his, and her, surprise, he found himself leaning in to kiss her. She did not object, but responded with heartfelt longing. Only when he pulled away and stared deep into her shining eyes did he wonder what had carried him so far.

"Cheetara, I..." he began, but his nerve failed him. She waited expectantly, hopefully almost. That look gave him courage, but not enough to quench the fear that hammered through his mind. What if she should reject him? It had happened once before, long ago, with another, when he had misread the signs and mistaken love for something less noble. It would take a lot for him to be so brave again. He loved this beautiful cheetah, who now looked up at him with a mixed expression of confusion and concern on her face. He had so nearly lost her to death, yet to lose her to an ill-judged outpouring would be worse. So, he smiled, kissed her on the forehead and got up to go.

At the door, he paused and turned to find that she was looking at him. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"Just wondering," she said, a touch sadly, "what else we have forgotten."

"If it was important," he said, "I'm sure that we'll remember it one day."

She sighed and sank deep into the pillows. "One day..." she murmured. "Seems a long way off..."

As weariness tugged at her eyelids, Tygra waited and watched as a peaceful expression settled over her face and she drifted into the land of sleep. "Sweet dreams," he whispered and left her to her rest.

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A slight change in the air was Mumm-ra's first indication that trouble was brewing. Lost in the translation of an ancient book of spells he had found in his library, at first he barely registered the light breeze that kissed his sunken cheek. Only when it started to ruffle his cloak did he look up from his book. The room was empty. The dust of ages lay undisturbed on the shelves, in particular one large heap of dust. It caught Mumm-ra's eye and he wandered over to investigate. Picking up the shredded pages, he noticed it came from a book he had acquired recently. He had expected it to last longer than this; it had cost him enough.

"Bah!" he muttered angrily, sweeping its remains onto the floor. "So much for the 'The Boke of Omins'. Useless waste of space it was too. Good riddance to it!"

"Problems, my lord?" came a soft, lilting voice, accompanied by the sweet scent of lotus blossom.

Mumm-ra sighed. It was *that* time again. "Welcome back, Almari," he groaned.

The End

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