

Evil's Bride

By Cheezey

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Author's Note: This is an updated version of a story I wrote originally over 10 years ago. It was rewritten and expanded once since, in 2000, but a recent review of it let me to go through it once more to update it with a few continuity tweaks that I feel are important to this and subsequent stories in the universe. Enjoy!

A sinister cascade of lightning crashed above the black pyramid in the forbidding desert of Third Earth. Deep in the heart of the dark structure, Mumm-Ra the Ever-Living stirred in his sarcophagus, awakened from the sleep of the undead. Irritated at the unexpected disruption to his rest, he emerged and stepped over to the edge of his cauldron. The liquid within it bubbled and an image slowly took form in the murky waters while Ma-Mutt approached the edge of the pool, barking loudly.

"What is it, my horrible hound?" Mumm-Ra said, looking down at his pet. The grotesque dog gave an excited bark in response and began to run around in circles. Puzzled by his behavior, and not in the mood to decipher his familiar's dog-speak, Mumm-Ra gave a sigh of exasperation. "If you've energy to spend, go dig a hole or something," he grumbled, and then quickly added, "and do it outside."

Ma-Mutt ignored his master and continued to bark with increasing urgency. Narrowing his eyes, Mumm-Ra decided to ignore Ma-Mutt's behavior for the time being and instead focus on the cauldron. He wondered if whatever it was that had Ma-Mutt so wound up was the same reason he had been so suddenly awakened. The image he saw in the pool was odd to him; the gloomy picture of a lone grave in what looked to him to be the Forest of Mists. The stone marker was weathered and crudely cut, and it seemed as though whoever rested there was long forgotten, except for one detail. A single flower, a freshly plucked moon lily, was carefully laid at its foot. Mumm-Ra's expression changed to one of curiosity. "Now why would the cauldron show me this?"

At the sound of his voice, the statues of the Ancient Spirits of Evil shook on their stands and their eyes glowed a bright and sinister red. "Mumm-Ra..."

Mumm-Ra looked up from the cauldron to the giant statues that loomed above him. He could not tell from their tone whether what they were about to say was good or bad. "What is it, Ancient Ones?"

"Mumm-Ra, after all this time, you still have yet to defeat the Thundercats. From what we have seen it is apparent that you do not have what it takes to rid this world of them on your own. To compensate for this incompetence, we have arranged for you to have a partner."

Their words stunned the mummy speechless for a long moment as the implication of what they had told him registered. A partner? An assistant was one thing-he had used those who the

Ancients had sent to aid him many times-but a partner? One who would presumably be his equal, with whom he would have to share the spoils of victory? That was ludicrous!

"No, spirits!" the indignant, and somewhat alarmed Mumm-Ra objected. "I will prove myself worthy! I can defeat the Thundercats! I don't need anyone else. I have both the Mutants and the Lunatacs in my employ. All I need is some time-"

"Time?" the spectral voices of his masters cut him off. "We have given you time! Time and time again you have tried, and time and time again you have failed. That is why we are sending you one who will join you in your quest to destroy the Thundercats. We are giving you a bride, an eternal partner in evil."

Mumm-Ra's previous thought of the notion as "ludicrous" suddenly felt woefully inadequate to convey his feelings on the matter. Furious, he hollered, "A bride? I have no need for a bride! I am Mumm-Ra the Ever-Living! I work alone!"

"Not anymore, Mumm-Ra, unless you want us to leave you with no power at all." Their response was seemingly oblivious to his outrage, a fact that did not escape his notice and galled him all the more.

"No!" Mumm-Ra desperately tried to think of a way, any way, to talk his masters out of the insane idea before it was too late. He could tell that they were not in the mood to be trifled with, and would not take open defiance well, but perhaps some humble supplication...

"Please, Ancient Ones," he said, amending his tone to one less rebellious, "Don't take my power. I swear on my unholy life that I will prove my worth to you, as I have over the millennia. But please, I beg you, my wicked masters, don't force me to-"

The Ancient Spirits of Evil were not swayed by what they considered more empty promises. "You will go now to this grave in the Forest of Mists and place this artifact on the tomb." The waters of the cauldron bubbled more actively and a stream erupted from the center, bearing a stone talisman carved with arcane symbols of power for Mumm-Ra to take. "It will call the spirit back into the body that lies there, and create from her remains an ever-living female being like yourself. She will rise from the grave to join you as your bride. After you awaken her you will bring her back here to be bonded with you in a dark marriage ceremony in our presence." The statues then lapsed into silence, and when Mumm-Ra made no immediate move to carry out their orders, they shook again, forcefully and impatiently, their eyes glowing a warning scarlet. "Go *now*, Mumm-Ra!"

Mumm-Ra recoiled, and glowered resentfully as he took the talisman. "All right. Who is she?"

"In life, she was a servant of evil, and your servant for a time. Her name was Torlei."

"Torlei?" Mumm-Ra repeated the name, searching his memory. He recalled that it belonged to a Lunatac, one that had been a part of Luna's gang of Lunar-Plundarrian renegades back when they had first come to Third Earth. The waters of the cauldron swirled again and that time formed

another vision to jog their servant's memory further. Mumm-Ra saw flashes of a time long past, when the Lunatacs arrived on his world. There were a total of seven of them: Luna, Amok, RedEye, TugMug, Chilla, Alluro, and one other, a female named Torlei. She was a psi and bore some resemblance to Alluro. Like him, she was tall and had a slender build, and had long grey hair of the same unkempt and wild consistency as his. Her belt also had a medallion not unlike the other psi's eye talisman, except that hers bore the image of a lightning bolt in the center. It had been the symbol of her power, the mastery of telekinesis and energy fields, which allowed her to move things with her mind and direct blasts of psychic energy at her adversaries. Mumm-Ra remembered then that she had been Alluro's sister, but unlike her brother and the rest of Luna's crew, she was no longer among the living.

Unchecked ambition and greed, qualities she shared with her fellow Lunatacs, had ultimately been her undoing. One day she had ventured into an ancient temple ruin on DarkSide and found a mystical black sphere that pulsed with energy that she realized she could use to augment her own powers. What she did not know was that the ruin had once been an altar to the Ancient Spirits of Evil, and that the orb was a focusing item of a long-gone priest who had not achieved immortality as Mumm-Ra had. All she had known at the time was what her psi senses discerned when she touched it, an incredible surge of power that seemed to fill the depths of her very soul. The lust to harness that power, combined with her own ambitions and destructive nature, drove her quickly into a twisted madness from which she would never recover.

Consumed with ambitions for conquest, she returned to the other Lunatacs and demanded that they make her their new leader instead of Luna. Though she had worked for Luna for years, Torlei had resented being subservient to her, and knew that the day would come when she would prove herself more worthy of leadership than Luna. But to her dismay, the other Lunatacs would not follow her, hurling accusations that she was mad, dangerous, and unstable. In her fury at being balked, she turned on all of them, her brother included, and attempted to kill them. With the magic of the Ancient Spirits of Evil reinforcing her powers, she was able to overpower them and imprison them in a telekinetic energy field that nearly burned them all alive. In an ironic twist of fate it was the physically weak Luna that saved the other Lunatacs. Her tiny size allowed her to slip through a small flux in Torlei's energy field long enough to take hold of and aim a laser pistol. She shot the psi woman and struck her dead in the heart, killing her instantly. The deadly energy field evaporated with Torlei's last mortal breath.

Although Mumm-Ra already knew the gist of the circumstances surrounding her death, he had never given it more than a passing thought. What was one less troublesome Lunatac to bother him, after all, when he had never held any particular fondness for any of the lot of them to begin with?

"So she is who you would have me bond with," Mumm-Ra mused, and glanced up at the statues dubiously. "Why her, Ancient Ones? What makes some fool Lunatac worthy of such power and immortality?"

The statues rumbled again and gave their answer, their ominous voices echoing through the dark sanctuary of the evil mage once more. "Torlei's mind touched our Dark Orb of Power and with that touch she learned the darkest secrets of our evil. That knowledge drove her mad, but it also

drew her to us. In her dying moment she agreed to give us her soul and servitude in exchange for more power and the chance to seek her revenge. Her spirit is restless and it has been waiting since her death to return to the physical plane and carry out her destiny. We will now grant that by having her join forces with you. Together you will have the means to defeat the Thundercats. Go to her grave and raise her now, Mumm-Ra. You know the consequences for disobedience." With that, the statues reverted to their inert state again and the spirit presences withdrew from the pyramid.

As the Ancient Spirits of Evil finished speaking, Ma-Mutt ran to his master's feet and barked again. Mumm-Ra frowned, reached down, and picked up his faithful hell-hound. "A wife. Of all the ridiculous things, the Ancients want a wife for Mumm-Ra the Ever-Living," he grouched. Ma-Mutt whined back at him. "What, you don't agree? Well, I suppose a woman might be worth having around for a few reasons." He smirked, pondering the possibility of more earthly pleasures he remembered from times past. "It doesn't look like I have a choice anyhow."

The resigned Mumm-Ra set Ma-Mutt back on the floor. "Guard the pyramid while I'm gone." The dog barked obediently in response, and Mumm-Ra flew off towards the Forest of Mists.

Skytomb was in chaos that afternoon. Luna was busy screeching at RedEye, TugMug, and Chilla to fix some faulty wiring that had just given their leader an electric shock that caused her hair to stand up on end, making it even bigger than usual. The other Lunatacs were taking great delight in making fun of her, which only served to worsen her mood. "What on Third Earth is taking you idiots so long to fix this?" she screeched angrily, waving her crop for emphasis.

"Luna, the power grid's destroyed. The surges burned up a lot of the circuits, and they have to be rewired," RedEye explained, rolling his eyes while his back was to her.

"It's going to take us hours to get the power cells recharged again too," added TugMug.

"Unless maybe we plug Luna's hair into them and drain the static," Chilla snickered, inspiring similar reactions in the other two.

"Enough out of you!" the irate Luna hollered. Her normally near-nonexistent patience was worn even thinner at the moment. "Just fix it! I don't like having only emergency power on in Skytomb. We're too vulnerable."

RedEye turned and frowned. "We're working as fast as we can. Besides, there's no sign of Thundercats on DarkSide. The scanners work well enough on emergency power to let us know if they're in the area." He brushed some grime off of his gloved hands. "If you want it done faster, get Alluro in here. If his lazy hide was here to help, the mess would be fixed faster."

"Where is he, anyway?" asked Luna.

"Right here," Alluro answered as he entered the room. When he saw Luna's impromptu hair restyling he laughed. "What happened to you? Did you stick your finger in an electrical socket?"

"She blew up the whole power grid just to get a new look," Chilla laughed rudely.

"For the last time, shut up and get to work!" Luna snapped at Chilla. "And where have *you* been, Alluro? You were supposed to be helping us!"

"I was out. There was something I had to do." His tone changed abruptly as he answered, becoming curt and mildly defensive. A more sensitive individual than Luna might have picked up on the cue not to press the issue, but Luna was not known for her sensitivity.

"What could possibly be more important than your duties at Skytomb?"

Alluro sighed and turned away. "Never mind, Luna, you wouldn't understand. I'll go get some tools," he said, and then left the room.

Luna frowned as he left. "Do any of you know what's going on with him? He's acting strange."

"Stranger than normal, you mean?" TugMug said with a snort, and then gave an odd look when something occurred to him. "Wait, what day is today?"

"The 189th day of the Third Earth year," RedEye answered automatically, and upon hearing the date, the Lunatacs fell silent and exchanged looks of realization. Chilla was the first to vocalize the thought however.

"Oh, this is the anniversary of the day Torlei-"

"I told you to never speak that name!" Luna shrieked, her mood growing exponentially fouler as she cut the icewalker off. She waved her crop at Chilla, her eyes ablaze with fury. "She was a traitor, Chilla, and I don't want any of you to ever mention her again. You know how I feel about that!"

"Like you ever keep how you feel to yourself," RedEye muttered, irritated by Luna's dramatics.

TugMug was also annoyed, mostly because he could not concentrate on the wiring when she was hollering. He set his pliers down and turned toward Luna. "She was crazy, Luna, and she was Alluro's sister. You can't expect him to just forget about it. Not even you're that cold."

Luna's angry scowl deepened and her voice rose in tandem with her temper. "She tried to kill me! She tried to kill us all. Don't expect *me* to forget *that*. Now finish this wiring job and tell Alluro to get over it and get back to work! I'll be upstairs. Take me out of here, Amok," she ordered her steed. Without a word of comment to add, the brute dutifully carried her out and to her quarters.

Miles away, Mumm-Ra arrived at Torlei's gloomy gravesite. He set the talisman that the Ancient Spirits of Evil had given him, a small onyx statue with jewels embedded in it, atop the headstone and began to chant in the ancient tongue of his evil masters. As he did, the wind picked up and whipped around him. A glow of energy began to emanate from the statue, which grew as Mumm-Ra finished chanting. It then pulsed outward, enveloping the gravesite and a swath of ground in front of it that covered the body laid to rest there. Mumm-Ra watched as magical energy caused the dirt to roll aside as something stirred and rose from beneath.

A moldering corpse, little more than a skeleton, emerged from the grave. Mumm-Ra would have found the sight fearsome and disgusting had he not been one of the undead himself. The decayed body stood, and another beam of unnatural light shot down from the sky and surrounded it. Mumm-Ra recognized it as the same energy that transformed him, the power of the Ancient Spirits of Evil. The light grew brighter as it engulfed the dead form, blinding him for just a moment. When his vision readjusted he could see the figure clearly. Instead of bare bones covered with desiccated patches of decayed flesh, he saw that she now had a form of supernatural skin covering her body. It was a sickly pale purple color, much like he imagined it would be for one of her people if they were in the throes of great illness or just after a lingering death. Her hair was restored to her body as it had been when she had died, long and gray like Alluro's, falling to her waist in length. Her skeletal horns were also restored, as was the moon birthmark upon her forehead, although the crescent now glowed an eerie and sinister red, as did her eyes. Torlei's clothing was the same as she had been buried in, repaired from its worm-eaten and tattered state from being in the ground so long. It was a navy blue dress with loose sleeves and a long hem that came to the ground, giving her a similar look to Mumm-Ra in his mummy form without the hood. At her waist was her lightning bolt medallion, hanging from a chain of thick silver links that encircled it like a belt. She could have almost passed for a living Lunatac if it were not for the unnatural glow of her eyes and birthmark, and the appearance of subtle fangs in her mouth.

Mumm-Ra noticed them glistening in the shadowy darkness of the Forest of Mists when she laughed a deep, evil laugh not unlike his own, except for the feminine tone. She immediately turned toward the sky and spoke. "Ancient Spirits of Evil, your eternal servant Torlei has been awakened!" She then noticed Mumm-Ra bearing witness to her resurrection, and immediately her expression changed from one of wicked delight to one of annoyed suspicion. "I was summoned back into the physical plane by Mumm-Ra the Ever-Living?"

The ever-living mage ignored the young immortal's rudeness. "Yes. I was sent here by the Ancient Spirits of Evil to raise you and take you back to the Black Pyramid to be my bride." He spoke without emotion, as if he was discussing a mundane matter of an attack plan to a Mutant.

"Your bride?" Torlei snapped back disgustedly. "You *must* be kidding." She had not thought much of Mumm-Ra in her mortal life, and even though they now served the same masters, she did not find that her feelings toward Mumm-Ra himself had changed much. Like the other Lunatacs, she still held him in contempt for destroying their ship and trying to force them into servitude. They had only worked for Mumm-Ra at all in those days because they had no choice,

but they certainly never enjoyed it. Torlei herself resented Mumm-Ra almost as much as she did Luna from the memories of her living days.

Mumm-Ra, meanwhile, quelled the urge to knock the arrogant resurrected Lunatac down a peg with a blast of red lightning. Satisfying as it might be, he knew that the Ancient Spirits of Evil would not approve. *Omnipotent bastards*, he thought resentfully. *They probably get a sick thrill out of this*. Instead all he said was, "They feel that I need a partner in my evil existence, and they chose you for me." His eyes glowed brightly for a moment before adding in a decidedly sarcastic tone, "Believe me, I'm just as pleased with this arrangement as you are."

Torlei let out a low growl, as the Ancients had not warned her of this particular quirk in her fate, but she was as powerless to do anything about it as Mumm-Ra was. Defying the Ancient Spirits of Evil was not an option. She let out a melodramatic sigh and forced herself to look at Mumm-Ra as a partner and mate, distasteful a thought as it was to her. "Lucky me," she said without bothering to mask her feelings on the matter. "So we're to be bonded then, Mumm-Ra? Why you, and why me?"

The demon priest of Third Earth gave an ambivalent shrug. "The Ancient Spirits of Evil have decreed it so. If I don't comply, they'll take away my power, and you must comply or they'll return your body to the grave it came from and your spirit to a ghostly state."

"Which is effectively useless," she said sourly, and joined Mumm-Ra's side. "So be it then. Lead the way to our home, *darling*."

"As you wish, *dear*," Mumm-Ra replied in a similarly sarcastic manner, and flew with her back to the pyramid.

Lynx-O tapped at the keys of the Braille board in the Tower of Omens wildly. "This is strange, very strange..." he mumbled.

"What is it, Lynx-O?" asked Pumyra, as she, Lion-O, Bengali, Panthro, and Cheetara all entered the control room.

"No trouble I hope," said Panthro. "We just got here to pick you up for the Berbil Harvest Festival tonight. I wouldn't want to miss it. There's gonna be a lot of good food."

Frowning, Lynx-O told them, "I'm picking up some strange energy readings emanating from the Forest of Mists. The fluctuations have caused minor disturbances in the Tower of Omens' monitoring equipment. I don't know what could be causing it."

"You can't get a fix on the signal?" Bengali asked.

"Only within a small area, and I can't bring up any images on the monitor."

Cheetara joined the lynx at the console, her sixth sense beginning to tingle as she pondered the situation. "Odd... my sixth sense is warning me about something. I can't tell what, but it seems like something bad. Very bad."

"Then I wonder if the Sword of Omens knows anything," Lion-O said, concerned, and lifted the sword up to his eyes. "Sword of Omens, give me Sight Beyond Sight!" The image of Mumm-Ra with Torlei at the gravesite was shown to him. "Oh no," he said, his voice almost a groan.

"What is it? What did you see?" asked Panthro.

Lion-O lowered the sword once the vision ended, and re-sheathed it in the claw shield. "It seems that Mumm-Ra raised someone from a grave with similar powers to him. She spoke with him and they flew off together. I think she's another avatar of the Ancient Spirits of Evil, perhaps an apprentice." He eyed the others with worry. "Oddly, she also looks like she's a Lunatac, or at least she was once upon a time."

"Another undead enemy?" Pumyra said incredulously. "Mumm-Ra's powerful enough on his own. Now we have to contend with two of them?"

Sighing, Cheetara said, "That explains the ominous feeling my sixth sense gave me when I concentrated on it."

"I wouldn't have thought there'd be a dead Lunatac here on Third Earth," Lynx-O mused. "They're alien to this world, originating on the Moons of Plundarr. I thought the Lunatacs of Skytomb were the only ones here. Did one of them die?"

Bengali let out an uneasy growl. "It's not Luna's grandmother again, is it? She was on Third Earth; that's how Mumm-Rana wound up with her belt."

Pumyra shook her head. "Mumm-Rana exiled her back to the Third Moon of Plundarr, where she was originally from. I'd guess she died there since she never came back to Third Earth."

"Besides, this new friend of Mumm-Ra's doesn't look at all like Luna. If I had to compare her to any of the Lunatacs we know, I'd have to say she looks the most like Alluro. I think she's the same race. I also got the impression that she's been dead for some time, probably since before Mumm-Ra entombed them in lava on DarkSide way before we ever came here. Her grave looked like it'd been there a while."

"There must've been more than just Luna's current crew when they came to Third Earth then," Cheetara guessed.

"Regardless of whether she's a Lunatac or not, it still means trouble for us if Mumm-Ra's involved, you can bet your claws on that," Panthro said, and looked to Lion-O. "We better find out what he's up to."

While listening to his peers, Lynx-O continued to monitor the Braille board for more information. "There's a shift in the energy," he informed them. "It's more focused. I think the atmospheric conditions in the Forest of Mists were interfering with it. Now I can trace it more clearly. It's moving toward Mumm-Ra's pyramid."

"Then I think we should go and find out exactly what Mumm-Ra's up to," Lion-O said decisively. "Lynx-O, stay here and keep monitoring the energy fields. Let us know of any changes, and let the others at the Lair know what's going on."

"Will do, Lion-O."

Lion-O turned to the others. "The rest of us will go to the Black Pyramid and find out exactly what is going on with Mumm-Ra and this dead Lunatac."

In the desert of sinking sands, Mumm-Ra and Torlei returned to what was now their pyramid. As soon as they touched down on the ancient stone floor, Ma-Mutt rushed to their feet, barking excitedly. He ran in a circle around the two of them, and after a cautious sniff in Torlei's direction, barked a greeting at her.

"A dog, Mumm-Ra?" Torlei asked with amusement. "How very domestic of you."

"He's some company I conjured up a while ago. Every sorcerer needs his companion animal," Mumm-Ra informed her.

"I believe the magical term is 'familiar' is it not? He's truly grotesque. He suits you." It was not clear whether she was being sarcastic or not, but Mumm-Ra did not care either way.

"Enough small talk. Let's get this bonding ceremony over with," he said gruffly.

Torlei's eyebrows rose at his rudeness. "How romantic. No wonder you've been single for thousands of years."

Mumm-Ra ignored that remark as well and instead went over to the platform by the pool. "Join me," he commanded, beckoning to her. She walked over and stood next to him, peering down into the murky waters of the cauldron. She had seen it before, of course, in the past when Mumm-Ra had summoned her and the other Lunatacs into his pyramid, but that perspective was new to her, and fascinating. Meanwhile Mumm-Ra began the ceremony. "Ancient Spirits of Evil, hear your servants Mumm-Ra and Torlei, who have come before your mighty presence to be bonded for all eternity!" Upon hearing his supplication to their masters, Torlei also snapped to attention and waited alongside him for their answer.

They were not kept waiting long. The statues rumbled and came back to life, aglow with dark power. "Mumm-Ra, we have heard your call and will bond your souls in darkness for all time, so that your powers may unite and work to each other's benefit, and that you may never be

separated and reign eternal in evil." Their attention focused solely on Mumm-Ra. "Do you, Mumm-Ra, take Torlei to be your ever-living companion with whom to plot and scheme in evil triumph or humiliating defeat, power or weakness, to never be separated in power or spirit, until the end of time?"

Glancing at his wicked fiancée, Mumm-Ra grimaced slightly and resigned himself. "I do."

The Ancients' attention turned to Torlei. "Torlei, do you take Mumm-Ra to be your ever-living companion with whom to plot and scheme in evil triumph or humiliating defeat, power or weakness, to never be separated in power or spirit, until the end of time?"

Torlei looked at Mumm-Ra and questioned whether or not this would be the biggest mistake of either life she had known, but she wisely refrained from pressing her luck by stating such or hesitating. "I do," she replied with about the same enthusiasm as Mumm-Ra had.

As soon as she verbalized her consent to their bonding, a clap of thunder crashed so loud it seemed to be within the black pyramid itself. The statues' eyes glowed a bright scarlet, and they focused their evil energies on the undead pair. Their voices echoed in unison and filled the chamber as they spoke the words that finalized their dark spell. "By all our powers of darkness, we now pronounce you mummy and wife." A supernatural beam of energy burst forth from each eye of each statue, striking in the dead center of their alignment to form one massive beam which then surrounded the two undead beings, drawing them together and intertwining them. Both could feel something changing and mingling in their aural energies, a force that would connect them permanently that could never be removed. When the spell completed, the statues reverted to their inert form and the magical energy dissipated into the musty air of the pyramid. Mumm-Ra and his new bride were left alone on the dais with Ma-Mutt at their feet, wagging his tail.

The two stared at each other for a long moment, until Mumm-Ra took a steep closer and leered at her. "Every groom is entitled to a kiss from his bride."

The undead Lunatac looked back at him and his rotting mouth with revulsion. While she was no better herself, her mortal memories were still fresh enough that the notion turned what would have been her stomach had she been alive. Even when she had been among the living, she had been a willing spinster, and a man like Mumm-Ra was hardly her type even if she had been so inclined. She took a step backward. "Er, Mumm-Ra, I don't-"

Fortunately for Torlei, their "moment" was shattered when a slew of Thundercats charged into the black pyramid with their weapons drawn. Lion-O, Panthro, Bengali, Pumyra, and Cheetara faced the two of them ready to strike. "Whatever you're up to, Mumm-Ra, you're not going to get away with it!" Lion-O announced, holding the Sword of Omens in front of him in a threatening pose.

"Thank the Ancients for small favors," Torlei mumbled, until she took note of the identity of their intruders. "Thunderians? Why would Thunderians be here on Third Earth?"

Mumm-Ra on the other hand let out a roar of outrage. Not so much that he missed his post-nuptial smooch, but mostly because the Thundercats had broken in and he had missed any warning signals that his home had been invaded by the enemy due to his preoccupation with the bonding ceremony. "They are the Thundercats," Mumm-Ra said contemptuously. "Their own Thundera was destroyed, and they came here to my world to infest it instead, preaching their infernal Code of Thundera and interfering with my evil rule. They are our enemies, ones who would prevent our rule in ultimate evil, the very ones the Ancients brought you to me to aid me in destroying! Let's do it now!" He shot a deadly burst of red lightning in the Thundercats' direction.

Predicting the attack, Lion-O leapt backwards and swung the Sword of Omens to deflect any stray charges of evil energy. With a loud cry of "Ho!" he in turn shot at Mumm-Ra with a powerful beam from the Sword of Omens, which Mumm-Ra dodged by leaping backwards, while Torlei darted to the side.

"You have nerve, Thundercat! You'll not get away with breaking into our pyramid and shooting at my dear husband," Torlei snarled viciously, and advanced toward them as she drew on her telekinetic powers. She could feel the Ancient Spirits of Evil's power flowing through her, and a vast pool of dark energy available for her to draw on beyond anything she had ever felt while alive, even after taking hold of the Dark Orb of Power.

The Thundercats meanwhile exchanged stunned looks when they heard what she said. "Your what?" Panthro repeated in disbelief.

"Did you say 'husband'?" Pumyra gasped at the same time.

Glowing at them, Torlei raised her hands, spreading her fingers as the tips began to spark. "The Ancient Spirits of Evil have bonded us for all eternity. Say hello to the new ever-living empress of Third Earth-Torlei, partner of Mumm-Ra," she announced haughtily, and released the energy she had been channeling with a violent blast. The force was great enough to knock the Thundercats backwards, and with a second flick of her wrists, a force field grew around them, trapping them inside unable to move. The web-like energy was the same she had once used on Luna and her crew just before her death, only stronger. She smiled with evil satisfaction. The power of the Ancient Spirits of Evil was delicious, and addictive. It was worth putting up with Mumm-Ra for, she decided, very much so.

Bengali grunted under the stinging force of the energy. "Ugh. What a-"

"She's Mumm-Ra's type all right," Cheetara muttered as she struggled fruitlessly against the telekinetic field. "Evil, mean-spirited, and undead."

Pleased at his bride's performance, Mumm-Ra stood over them and sneered. "I'm so glad you decided to crash our little wedding reception, Thundercats. What better gift could there be than the chance to destroy our enemies right here and now?" he asked, laughing, and put an arm around Torlei's waist.

Unimpressed, Panthro groaned in disgust. "Well save it for the honeymoon, if you make it that far, you undead bag of bones!"

Torlei, meanwhile, was also not impressed by Mumm-Ra's possessive display, and turned toward him with a sour look. "Well it's nice that you've gotten what *you* want, Mumm-Ra, but *I* haven't. The Thundercats mean nothing to me. They're your enemies. I captured your foes, but you haven't returned the favor."

Mumm-Ra's temper flared. "What foolishness is this? We are partners, my dear," he snapped angrily. "My enemies are your enemies. Besides, who could we possibly need to destroy more than the Thundercats?"

"I still have a bone to pick with Luna," Torlei replied with narrowed eyes. "She killed me, and I will see her pay *dearly* for it. The way I see it, you owe me my enemies' heads on a platter the same way I got you yours. Either you fetch me her for my revenge, or I'll let these feline pests go."

"What?" Mumm-Ra exclaimed in outrage. "You would dare cross me that way? We are partners, upstart, and don't you forget it!"

A half-smile of sarcastic sweetness crossed her lips. "Watch me."

Mumm-Ra saw the Thundercats taking in the exchange with rapt attention and knew that they would spring loose the second she gave them the opportunity ready for what they had to dish out, and while he remained confident that they could be handled, he did not want the hassle. Torlei had the advantage of surprise on her first attack, but the Thundercats were quick learners and not to be underestimated. Having them captured and incapacitated was too advantageous to allow her tantrum to ruin. He grimaced as he responded. "I see loyalty is not one of your better traits, but I should have known that from the circumstances of your death. Very well, have your way then. I will humor you and capture Luna, but *only* because I want the Thundercats destroyed and they're so conveniently packaged as it stands."

"No," Torlei interrupted, her eyes gleaming red in the darkness. "That's not good enough. I don't want just Luna. I gave you five, so you give *me* five. Bring me Luna plus four of the others, at least." She eyed him evenly. "Prove yourself that worthy of my company, Mumm-Ra, and I'll be quite an agreeable wife to you."

Livid at her arrogance and pushiness, Mumm-Ra considered blasting her on the spot with his own powers, but he refrained knowing that it would only be counterproductive to his own goals. "I raised you from the dead! Isn't that enough for you? You should be groveling in gratitude for the favor I gave you."

"Do it," she pressed, "or I might just get distraught over our little quarrel that I lose my concentration, and with it, the hold on the telekinetic field they're in. Then they'd get away... oh my, wouldn't that be a shame?"

Her sarcasm simultaneously disgusted and enraged him. "Oh, fine!" He shot the floor between them with a red-hot beam of energy that singed the stone floor in lieu of hitting her. "Have it your way, then, you miserable woman. I'll go and get those damnable Lunatacs for you."

Torlei grinned, a manipulative and vindictive smile that Mumm-Ra knew already he would hate for years to come. "Thanks, honey," she purred in the condescending tone that seemed sharper in her native Fourth Moon accent, the same shared by her brother. Not surprisingly, Mumm-Ra's only response was to curse at her in at least seven different dead languages under his breath as he flew out of the pyramid.

Bengali whispered to Panthro, pinned beside him in the force field. "I think he was better off as a bachelor."

Panthro and the other Thundercats muttered in grim agreement. They were in big trouble, and they knew it.

After what felt like an eternity to them but was in truth only a matter of hours, the Lunatacs were finally able to restore power to Skytomb and had a chance to take a break. Luna returned to the company of the others after the power had come back on and after she finished attempting to de-frizz her hair. She was still on the other side of the common room that served as Skytomb's equivalent of a lounge or living room with Amok while the others lounged about on seats and couches at the far side of the room. Chilla was still fuming over the way Luna had bitched at her earlier, and was ranting about it quite fervently to the others, who had already grown bored and were half tuning her out. "How dare she scream at me like that just because I said Torlei's name? It's not my fault she was in a bad mood because she was dumb enough to shock herself senseless."

RedEye shrugged. "Luna's been screaming at us for years. You should be used to it by now, Chilla."

"Besides, you know how she feels about Torlei. You should have known better than to say anything," TugMug added.

"Well she asked, didn't she?"

Sprawled out on one of the couches with his feet up, Alluro frowned. "You didn't need to spell it out. I managed to avoid saying anything, and I'm the one who went to..." he sighed again, and decided to drop the subject. "Never mind. All you managed to do was give her a license to badmouth my sister for days. I'd rather remember her the way she was before her insanity, not rehash her final moments through Luna's eyes," he said grouchyly.

"Your sister tried to do us all in, including you," Luna said coldly as she joined the others, sitting upon Amok's back with a towel wrapped around her head. "We would all be dead if I hadn't

stopped her. Of course, you forget that part, don't you, when you reminisce about the 'good old days' with that traitorous witch."

Alluro's only response was to cast an angry glare at Luna, while the others grumbled under their breaths and rolled their eyes, a typical reaction after having lived with her for so long.

Even Amok had enough of the conversation, and the usually silent brute growled a quiet but distinct, "Stop it." The other Lunatacs cast a surprised look in his direction, for Amok so rarely said anything at all that whenever he did, they usually listened. The brute's face retained its usual expressionless countenance, save a somewhat weary look in his eyes. "No more talk."

"Amok is right," Alluro agreed. "Drop it."

"Fine," Luna grumbled, although her tone made it clear that she wanted to do anything but.

Chilla cast a curious glance at the towel wrapped around their tiny leader's head like a turban. "So how's your hair?"

Luna pulled the towel off and ran her stubby fingers through the damp and unruly purple and white strands. "It's wet from trying to get the static out, and charred at the ends from the electrical burns. I had to cut off two inches."

TugMug snorted in amusement at Luna's vanity. "I don't see a difference; your hair is still as big as ever."

"And you're still as ugly and stupid as ever," Luna retorted nastily.

"And you're all my prisoners!" Mumm-Ra's voice boomed as he crashed through the outside wall of Skytomb and into the room. Debris from the mage's dramatic entrance flew everywhere, and the six Lunatacs instinctively ducked or took cover behind large pieces of furniture before turning to see what had happened. When they did, and the dust began to settle, the Lunatacs' shock changed to outrage when they saw that their "ally" had just done them extensive property damage.

Luna and Amok charged forth and confronted the undead devil priest. "Mumm-Ra! What in the name of the Moons is the matter with you? You just broke our wall!" she screeched.

TugMug hopped angrily and shook his fist as he joined Luna and Amok's side. "You'd better fix that, you worthless bag of bones!"

Mumm-Ra did not even bother to dignify TugMug's insult with a reply, and instead he addressed them all with his arms raised and ready to attack. "I'm taking you all as my prisoners as a gift to my new bride." He let out a dark laugh.

His announcement shocked the Lunatacs more than his stated intent to capture them. "Your wife?" Chilla repeated, stunned. "Who on Third Earth would be stupid enough to marry you?"

Mumm-Ra cackled once more and his eyes glowed a malignant red. "You all knew her very well in life, Lunatacs. In fact, I believe this is the anniversary of her death."

Alluro stared at Mumm-Ra in complete horror and disbelief. "Torlei? But she's..."

"Dead?" Mumm-Ra cut the psi off. "Not anymore, Alluro. Not since she became the bride of Mumm-Ra the Ever-Living, and gained the gift of immortality from the Ancient Spirits of Evil. Now she lives just as I do!" He advanced toward them, smiling cruelly. "And she has plans for you, Luna, as well as the rest of you. She only wanted four, but I think she'll be quite, heh heh, appreciative if I give her a complete set."

"You can give her this," an unimpressed Chilla hissed back, and she spat a lungful of ice at him. Mumm-Ra predicted the icewalker's attack and blasted her in return with a blast of red lightning. It struck her in the chest, searing into her cold flesh, knocking her down immediately, clutching her body in pain.

As she witnessed the attack on Chilla, Luna was reminded of the first time Mumm-Ra had gotten the better of her and crew, and she was determined to do all that she could to stop it from happening again. The lunar woman held on tightly to her brute's horn, and she and Amok charged Mumm-Ra from one side. TugMug took the opportunity to charge the devil priest from the other side hoping to overwhelm him with a double-sided simultaneous attack. He fired heavyweight gravity beams in Mumm-Ra's direction, but the mage's reflexes were as quick as the magical lightning he had struck Chilla with, and he deflected the graviton's attack with ease. Instead of their intended target, the first beam hit Amok, slamming both him and Luna into the floor and pinning them there before the brute could even get in the first swing, while the second bounced back and hit TugMug himself, stopping him dead in his tracks. He landed on his side on top of his carbine, making it a laborious and difficult chore to discharge a beam to counter it under the weight of the force field. RedEye was right behind his fallen fellow Lunatacs, and his sidewinder shot into the fray only a second after Luna, Amok, and TugMug fell, but Mumm-Ra saw that coming as well and ducked in time for it to do no more than clip his shoulder before colliding with the destroyed wall behind him.

Alluro used Mumm-Ra's distraction for a last ditch effort to overcome him with his own powers, although his confidence was shaken as Mumm-Ra had always been resistant to being thrallled and watching the other Lunatacs fall one by one only made it worse. Still, his arrogant demeanor did not convey the apprehensiveness he felt, for the spite and loathing he had for Mumm-Ra made a perfect cover of defiance. "Give up, Mumm-Ra," he said, projecting his will forcefully into his voice as the orb from his psyche club flew into position above Mumm-Ra's head. "You cannot resist. You will release us and leave. You know you don't stand a chance at overpowering us."

Mumm-Ra let out a derisive burst of laughter. "Don't I? I defeated your friends in mere minutes, and you'll go faster than them, foolish Lunatac. You ought to know by now that your worthless mind powers only affect the living." He reached up and grabbed Alluro's orb from where it hovered above him and channeled his own energy into it before hurling it back at the hypnotist. Alluro was not fast enough to duck or dodge, and it hit him hard in the torso,

electrifying him with the mage's damaging electrical energy on contact. With Alluro taken care of, Mumm-Ra turned to RedEye, sneering. "Pathetic. That was even easier than the last time I defeated the lot of you." He then blasted RedEye as he did Chilla, and laughed viciously at the incapacitated Lunatacs while he summoned a magical net to entrap them. Once they were bound, he picked the net up and flew through the broken wall into the sky and back to his pyramid.

When he arrived, Mumm-Ra dropped the net full of captured Lunatacs right at the feet of his finicky partner. "There," he said with flat impatience and more than a bit of sarcasm, "just to please you, I captured all six of them. I do hope that you're happy now?" Torlei's red eyes lit up with wicked glee as she eyed up the captured forms of the Lunatacs she had once lived with, and though she did not say anything, Mumm-Ra could see that she was pleased. That in turn pleased him, for it meant that they could get on with what he wanted most, which was to deal with the Thundercats. "Now can we move on and destroy the Thundercats? Or would you perhaps like a diamond ring first?"

The smile on Torlei's face faded at his mockery. "Don't patronize me."

"Then don't delay me any longer with your whims," he snapped back.

Panthro watched the interchange with an odd mixture of dread and puzzlement. "This couldn't get any stranger if it tried," he muttered. "Mumm-Ra took the Lunatacs prisoner along with us."

"Whatever they're up to, it can't be good," Bengali growled in a whisper.

Cheetara nodded along with them, about the only move she could manage trapped as they were by Torlei's telekinetic magic. "We have to get out of here and stop them." She grunted with fruitless exertion. "But I just can't move under this force field."

"If only I could reach the Sword of Omens, I could call Tygra, Lynx-O, and the Thunderkittens," Lion-O lamented. "But I'm not sure I could even hold it if I managed to call it. In this pressure I can't budge an inch."

Ignoring the Thundercats in favor of the new captives, Torlei strode over to the Lunatacs and stared down at them. "Hello Luna dear," she greeted her former leader with false sweetness. "I bet you didn't expect to see me here, did you?"

"Actually I did," Luna retorted contemptuously. "Mumm-Ra gloated to us about your little marriage. It's a perfect match if ever I saw one. You two truly deserve each other."

Alluro was less hostile and more in shock seeing his dead sister alive and walking before them. Words failed him for several moments given the conflicting array of emotions it stirred in him, but finally he managed to speak to her. "Torlei... sister, is that really you?"

She turned and glowered at him. "I'm standing here, aren't I, brother?"

The venom and hatred in her tone made him wince, although he supposed on some level that he should not have expected otherwise given the terms they had parted on prior to her death. "Why are you doing this?" he asked.

The undead psi woman's lips turned up in a sneer. "Being murdered tends to bring out my vengeful side, Alluro. And you all standing around watching while she did it makes you just as guilty of betrayal as she is."

"I loved you," Alluro retorted, heartsick at the biting edge in her voice that he remembered from that fateful confrontation all those years ago. Time had dulled some of the unpleasant details from his memory, and he wished that they could have stayed buried as he had forgotten just how painful they were. "I mourned your death for years. I'm still mourning it. I visited you at your grave. Surely if your spirit was still here you remember that? You must understand-"

It seemed for the briefest moment that his words sparked a glimmer of affection, but the rage in her soul and the influence of the Ancient Spirits of Evil vanquished it quickly. "Understand what?" she hissed back at him. "That you betrayed me and watched me die?"

Alluro turned away, unable to stand the burning hatred in her eyes that pulsed with the powers of Mumm-Ra's masters. "I never betrayed you."

His answer did not amuse her, and she shot him in the neck with a stinging charge of telekinetic energy that made him cringe in pain. "Liar! Who refused to side with me when I came to you with my plan for taking over leadership from Luna?" she challenged. "Who called me crazy and tried to steal my orb? Who didn't stop Luna when she shot that blaster at me?" she roared in fury, and shot him again, that time making him yelp.

"You tried to kill us!" Alluro snapped back at her, feeling the same miserable surge of anger and guilt as he had the first time around.

"You chose *her*," Torlei screamed, and shot the net-full of the Lunatacs with another burning beam of energy enhanced by her newly granted powers from the Ancient Spirits of Evil. "*Luna*." She spoke the name as if it were a curse. "You sided with Luna, dear brother! And you have the absolute gall to claim that you didn't betray me?" She thrust both hands forward, and the entire group of them rolled roughly backwards and slammed into the base of one of the giant stone statues. "All I wanted was for you to recognize me as the leader. I was always smarter, more organized, and I even treated you all with more respect than Luna ever did. If she'd accepted quietly, I'd have even let Luna stay in the group. But no. You chose her!" She walked over to where Alluro lay and stared down hard at him. "Why is that? Was Luna better for you? Did she satisfy some sick fantasy of yours that I never could?"

Despite their own dire situation, the exchange between Torlei and the Lunatacs now had the Thundercats' full attention as well. Insight into the enemy was not only useful, but fascinating. Until that point, none of the Thundercats knew anything about others that they had once associated with, and in fact they had known little about the personal lives of the Lunatacs at all. They certainly had not known that Mumm-Ra's new bride was Alluro's sister or that Luna

had killed her. It struck them as strange to see the Lunatacs in the light of being individuals with families or personal connections that meant something to them when they were used to thinking of them in terms of being raiders motivated only by greed and personal gain.

Alluro meanwhile blanched at Torlei's implication of him having anything to do with Luna in such a way. "Never, Torlei. You know I always felt that blood was thicker than water... but the power in that orb twisted you. It made you irrational, destructive, and dangerous."

"He's right," Chilla spoke up from where she lay. "None of us would follow you because you'd have gotten us all killed. That black orb thing you had messed up your mind and your judgment."

"And that's why I tried to get it away from you," Alluro finished.

Disgusted with their excuses, Torlei blasted them all again. "That 'black orb thing', as Chilla so eloquently put it, was the best thing that ever happened to me. It's what gave me the knowledge and power that allowed me to overcome my mortal limitations and tap into the very power of the universe that only accomplished mages could channel. It's what allowed me to cheat death, and put you in your places... then *and* now."

"All it put you in was in your grave," Alluro said bitterly.

"Not another word out of you, brother!" Torlei's voice was full of raw rage and emotion. "It's you that hurt me most of all, you and your precious Luna. I sacrificed years of my life caring for you. I raised you after our parents died, you so young you barely remember their faces or the sound of their voices. I was but a child myself but still I stole, demeaned, and even sold myself to take care of the two of us. And how did you repay me? You lied to me, you schemed against me, and sided with Luna. How do you think that made me *feel*?"

Alluro was stung on multiple levels by her accusations and her twisted take on the events that transpired the day she died at their old base on DarkSide's Moonfire Peak. "That's not how it happened. You weren't in your right mind then. You aren't now."

"You aren't kidding. You'd have to be missing a few screws to join with Mumm-Ra," Bengali growled from across the room.

"What do you know; even Thundercats can get something right sometimes," Luna remarked.

Torlei glared in the tiger's direction briefly before giving Alluro one final threatening look. "I'll deal with your betrayal later. But first I want revenge on the one that delivered my fatal blow." She turned to Luna, who despite being stubborn enough to not want to give an enemy the satisfaction of seeing her squirm, had a look of genuine fear in her eyes. Amok could feel it, and he grunted and struggled in the magical net, but he could not move enough in it to help Luna, especially since the strangling strands shocked him harder the more he fought against them. Torlei used her powers to part the net enough to reach Luna and sneered at her. "Now Luna, we'll see just how tough you are without Amok to save your neck."

"Wait," interrupted Mumm-Ra as he joined Torlei's side. He had been allowing his new bride a moment or two to gloat in victory, but he had his own ideas for what would be done with their prisoners. She favored him with a venomous stare, which secretly pleased him after she had interfered in his personal revenge on the Thundercats earlier. Payback was only fair, and in combination with being evil, it was downright delightful. "I have a better idea, my dear. One that will allow us to have a little more fun with them. Let's put them aside and 'save' them for now as a souvenir of the day we conquered Third Earth. If we seal them in molten rock they can serve as a warning to those who would cross us, at least until we think of something suitably painful and torturous enough to do to them when we decide we're finished with them once and for all." He grinned, eyes alit with malicious intent. "As statues they might as well be dead. We're the only ones who know how to release them, except for those incompetent mutants, but they can't even lace their loincloths, much less undo a magic spell without our aid. If we were to simply kill them now, the fun would be all over with too soon, and the death of a hated enemy is a terrible thing to waste."

Upon hearing Mumm-Ra's plan, RedEye let out a snort of disgust from inside the net. "Molten rock again? How original of you, Mumm-Ra."

Panthro could not help but laugh at the Lunatac's remark. "He never was much in the creativity department. He has about five basic attack plans that he alters slightly, thinks he's brilliant when he does so, and then when he's defeated, wonders why."

Mumm-Ra roared in outrage and shot red lightning from both hands at the panther. "Silence! Do not dare to mock me, Thundercat!"

Torlei meanwhile considered his plan. "I suppose if we entombed them in stone, we could think of tortures to subject them to at our leisure... and prove that furry fool wrong about our ingenuity."

"Excellent," Mumm-Ra said with a grin. "Let's take our prisoners to the proper site for the spell, then!" He nodded to Torlei, and the two of them lifted their helpless captives into the air and flew with them to the largest active volcano on Third Earth.

It did not take Mumm-Ra and Torlei long to prepare their spell and victims for the entombment. The undead newlyweds stood upon the rocky rim of the volcano with the Thundercats and Lunatacs secured several feet away in one large Thundrainium cage attached to a pulley setup that would lower them slowly into the volcano while Mumm-Ra and Torlei cast the spell. The Thundrainium rendered the Thundercats as weak as kittens, and while it did not affect the Lunatacs, they were still trapped without their weapons so there was little they could do but languish beside their incapacitated adversaries. Adding to the indignity of the situation was the fact that they could see all of their weapons piled up in a heap out of their reach. Though Mumm-Ra and Torlei did not need the weapons, they both enjoyed knowing that their prisoners would feel even more wretched being able to see but not use them to escape their demise.

"I don't believe this," grumbled Panthro. "Of all the ways to end it, I never pictured it like this, imprisoned in a Thundrainium cage with our enemies, about to be sealed up in rock by two corpses practicing black magic."

"The most disgusting part of it is that it's our so-called 'ally' doing it to us again," RedEye said irritably.

Luna sat sullenly upon Amok's back and looked over at the weakened Lion-O, who was sprawled out with the other Thundercats on the floor of the Thundrainium cage, barely conscious. "Lion-O, why doesn't your 'all powerful' Sword of Omens get us all out of here?"

"They took our weapons, Luna." Lion-O replied in a voice little stronger than a whisper.

"Well can't you call your stupid sword? It works every other time you're imprisoned," said TugMug.

"I don't have the strength to call for it loud enough for the Eye to hear me," Lion-O answered, his voice so fatigued it seemed that he might pass out at any moment. "Thinking and wishing and even whispering for it to come hasn't worked so far."

Pumyra struggled to sit up, and grimaced as the Thundrainium burned the palms of her hands which she was using to support her weight. "There must be some way out of here, some way to stop them."

"How?" Chilla hissed from where she leaned against the bars. She felt almost as weak as the Thundercats looked from the volcano's oppressive heat. "You Thundercats can barely move! I'm the only one of us here with any kind of weapon, and this heat is killing me." She panted and wiped her forehead, which came away unnaturally moist for an icewalker. "And even if it wasn't, I can't spit enough ice to put out a volcano."

Cheetara looked over at Alluro. "I have an idea," she whispered hoarsely.

"What is it?" asked Lion-O.

"Alluro, Torlei's your sister, right?"

The psi regarded the cheetah with a frown. "Yes. She was, anyway, in another lifetime. I have no idea what she is now that Mumm-Ra's twisted her."

"Maybe you could use that. It's obvious she remembers you, and you are her kin. Part of her must still care about you," Cheetara suggested.

Alluro let out a hollow chortle. "I know you Thundercats are slow, but I think it'd be obvious even to you how she feels about me. She made that quite clear back at Mumm-Ra's pyramid."

"Not necessarily," argued Pumyra. "Of any of us, you'd have the most chance of reaching whatever good," she paused, and amended as she reconsidered her words, "whatever mortality still might exist in her."

TugMug snorted with amusement at the Thundercat's slip. "Maybe you're not as dumb as you look. At least you don't think we Lunatacs are cut from the same goody-goody cloth that you are."

Pumyra ignored TugMug's remark and continued to talk after taking another labored breath. "You're not only a hypnotist, Alluro, but as her brother you could sway her with both emotion and your powers. You might be able to get through to her. Maybe if you remind her of your past together, your connections and happy memories-

"That she'd renounce Mumm-Ra and let him out," Chilla finished for the puma, and turned toward Alluro as well. "It might work. Of any of us, she was closest to you."

Cheetara nodded, glad that the others understood what she had been thinking but had not had the energy to explain thanks to the Thundrainium. "Then you could let the rest of us out of here." Although she did not like the odds of trusting a Lunatac to play savior to them, it was the only chance they had, and it was not out of the realm of possibility that the Lunatacs would aid them solely to spite Mumm-Ra.

Luna meanwhile scoffed at the notion. "It won't work. Torlei had no compunctions about trying to kill Alluro along with the rest of us the day I killed her, and that was more a lucky shot than anything. Thank the gods I could reach that blaster and shoot the traitorous witch, or we'd have all been dead that day." She wrinkled her nose. "Funny thing is I never expected the shot'd be enough to kill her. I intended to have Amok deal with her when we got out. But what's done is done."

Bengali growled. "Only you could talk about taking life in such cavalier terms."

Frowning at the tiger, Luna retorted, "Killing to save myself, not to mention the others-which I'd think you Thundercats might call honorable if it was another Thundercat doing it-might not seem noble to you, but you'd be surprised at what you'd do if your life depended on it, boy." She tapped her boot against Amok's horn. "But my point is that Torlei doesn't care about any of us. The woman bound herself to Mumm-Ra, for crying out loud! There's no goodness to reach in her. You're fools if you think there is."

"I can't believe that," Lion-O argued, grunting with effort to get on his elbows. "There's some goodness in everyone, even the most hard-hearted souls." He looked pointedly at Luna. "Even you."

"Hah," was Luna's only response to that.

"Yes," pressed the Thundercat Lord. "If no one else, you care about Amok... or else you wouldn't have apologized to him after he threw away your grandmother's belt."

"Shut up, fool. Don't make presumptions that make you look more foolish than you already do."

RedEye groaned, irritated at the continued bickering in the face of their impending doom. "This is pointless. If you have a plan, you ought to try it now. Those two are chomping at the bit," he said, gesturing to the undead pair on the volcano's rim.

Looking from Mumm-Ra and Torlei to the bubbling lava awaiting below, Bengali shuddered. "How badly does it hurt?" he asked the Lunatacs with an overwhelming sense of dread. "He did it to you once already."

"It's not so bad," Alluro said with smooth sarcasm. "Just imagine someone pouring concentrated acid over every part of your body, burning with a painful sensation that pales in comparison to anything else you might've felt, until you go numb, blind, and lose your awareness altogether from pain and oblivion." A sick smile crossed his lips. "And it feels the same in reverse when you're freed, too."

The description of an ordeal he would have liked to forget ever happened the first time rattled TugMug enough that he pulled furiously at the bars of their cage again. He was strong, but not strong enough to break the Thundrainium bars the cage was built of. "Screw that. I'm not going through that again!"

"Doesn't look like we have much choice," Panthro said with a low growl.

"Unless we take the long shot," said Cheetara as she eyed Alluro expectantly. "At least *try* to get through to your sister."

Alluro frowned. "Much as it galls me to say Luna's right, she probably is." He looked at Torlei in the distance at Mumm-Ra's side and tried to reconcile the sister he had once known to the creature that called herself her now.

"You have nothing to lose by trying," Lion-O urged.

Sighing, Alluro gave a small nod of consent. "Understand that we're grasping at straws here. Even though I'm the most powerful hypnotist on this or any other planet, mind powers don't work well on beings such as Mumm-Ra."

"Then speak from your heart. I'm sure you Lunatacs have them, even if you don't use them much." Cheetara offered a half-smile of encouragement to the psi.

Alluro did not respond to either Thundercat, or to the muttered derisive remarks he heard coming from Chilla and TugMug's directions in response to the Thundercats, but instead went to the part of the cage that most closely faced Mumm-Ra and Torlei. "Torlei!" he called out, his tone forceful but without anger.

The undead psi whirled around at the sound of his voice and glared at him. "What?"

"Please don't do this, sister," he said in a lowered tone full of heartfelt sincerity.

Unimpressed with Alluro's last moment plea for mercy, Mumm-Ra let out a jeer while Torlei strode closer. "Give me one reason not to," she challenged hatefully.

Steeling his resolve, Alluro replied, "I understand why you're so angry. Of course you are. I know how it must seem from your standpoint... but you must understand. Luna never *meant* to kill you."

"She meant to wound me then?" Torlei scoffed incredulously. "Cause me agonizing pain? Is that pathetic defense supposed to make me want to spare you?"

"No! It was a misunderstanding. Nobody wanted you dead. Luna shot to snap you out of it, not kill you. I know it's no consolation and it can't be undone, but I swear to you it's the truth. None of us wanted you to die, especially me." He stared intently into her eyes, sickened by the malevolent red glow in them instead of the pale yellow she had in life. "You're my sister. I loved you. I still do."

Torlei advanced toward him, her expression hard as ever. "Your intentions mean nothing, and regardless of Luna's supposed intentions, I still wound up dead," she countered viciously. "Maybe things would've been different for you if you'd stayed loyal to me, or if you'd at least *tried* to stop her from killing me, but you didn't." Her scarlet eyes narrowed. "No, brother dear, I'm afraid your half-baked words of sentimentality aren't enough to wipe the slate clean. Actions speak louder than words and you proved where your loyalties lie back at Moonfire Peak, so now you can pay the price with your chosen allies along with your enemies. As far as I'm concerned, I have no brother. Mumm-Ra and the Ancient Spirits of Evil, the ones that restored the life that Luna took from me, are my family now. You're nothing and you mean nothing to me, Alluro."

Using what strength he could muster, Lion-O crept closer to the side of the cage. "I don't believe that," he said. "There's a part of you that still wants to care about your brother."

"What do you know, feline?" Torlei hissed resentfully in the lion's direction. "Don't dare to assume you know anything about what I feel, Thundercat."

"Keep going," Cheetara whispered from behind Alluro. "Remind her of good times you had with her."

Brushing aside the thought of how odd it was to have Thundercats offering familial counseling advice, Alluro pressed on with the arrogant thought that he did not need them telling him how to approach his sister when he was the master of the mind and persuasion. "Sister, listen to me. I thought about what you said back at the pyramid. You were right-you did so much for me over the years. I must seem rather ungrateful... and I'm sorry." He paused a moment to let his words sink in. "For so long you were all I had. You raised me when you were but a child yourself, only six years older than me. I know what you went through to keep us both safe when you could've just left me behind to fate. I'll always love you for that, and for the times we shared

during and afterward. We were all each other had for so very long, long before we even knew Luna and the others." He smiled wanly. "Remember what that was like? When we would go from city to city conning the wealthy to get what we needed, and perhaps a bit extra for fun? Or what you taught me about using my own powers above and beyond the lessons we got from the temples and tutors? You always said I was like our mother, that I had her powers, even though I don't remember her." He watched as glimmers of recognition registered on her harsh features, and smiled more confidently.

"Remember how we'd laugh at the stunts we pulled? Like the time I hypnotized that puffed-up little worm Zymachus to moon the mayor after he crossed us? I thought you'd collapse on the spot you were laughing so hard. How about when we met the rest of them all those years ago in the capitol?" He gestured to the Lunatacs imprisoned with him. "Remember how it felt to bring our enemies to their knees as a team? Even that dreadful mad dash out of the club that brought us here to Third Earth was a rush. The Moons still must have our names down in the history books as a gang not to cross." His smile faded. "Tell me, can you truly forget all of those good times, and let one terrible misunderstanding and that wretched mummy to torture and kill me now?" His voice grew shaky. He was no longer drawing on his hypnotic powers at all, though his words were charged with enough emotion that they carried a sway of their own.

She remained silent as she listened to him speak, but a faint echo of wistfulness and regret flashed across Torlei's features as she remembered the times Alluro spoke of, as well as others he did not, before the incident with the orb back on Moonfire Peak. Still wary, she searched his eyes for the slightest hint of deceit, but found none.

"It's working..." Pumyra whispered.

Lion-O seized the opportunity that Alluro had provided for their escape with his distraction. The renewed hope of having a plan had given Lion-O enough of an adrenaline surge to provide the strength he needed to call on the powers of the Eye of Thundera. Mustering every bit of energy he could, he called out forcefully, "Sword of Omens, come to my hand!" His voice cracked on the last word, and it ended in a half-cough, but it was enough to wake the Eye nonetheless. The mystic gem flashed red, and the blade magically rose from the inert pile of weapons and flew in his direction.

When he saw what was happening, Mumm-Ra let out a furious shout. "Oh no you don't!"

It was too late, and the sword fell firmly into Lion-O's grasp, while Torlei's face twisted back into its hateful rage as she realized that she'd been had. "You'll sink to any level to save your own hide, won't you, Alluro?" she hissed with unbridled contempt. "You used our past distract me so your *enemy* Lion-O could free you all!"

"No! That's not what I was doing," Alluro protested, furious at the Thundercats' timing to make it seem like he had betrayed his sister yet again. Although his aim was to get out and survive, his words to Torlei had been sincere, and he hated Lion-O as much as he did Mumm-Ra for turning her further against him.

Torlei scowled. "You almost fooled me, brother. I almost believed you actually cared about me, and that I might've been wrong in wanting to see you dead along with Luna and the others. But you've proven yet again that brother or not, you're not worth it, and that family will stab you in the back just as soon as anyone else," she said venomously. "All you care about is yourself, and what you can get. Well you'll get what you deserve as Luna's little second banana-to fry alongside her and the rest of your friends. Burn, all of you!" She spoke a spell invocation that caused the chain on the cage to begin lowering into the lava.

Fortunately for the prisoners, the Sword of Omens revitalized Lion-O's Thundrainium-weakened body, and he raised it as high as he could through the bars. "Not this time we won't. Thunder, Thunder, Thundercats-Ho!" His powerful battle cry echoed to the heavens and the Thundercat signal burned its image into the ashen sky. The power of the Eye of Thundera quickly restored the strength of the other Thundercats while Lion-O sliced open the top of the cage. Everyone inside, Thundercat and Lunatac alike, leapt out of the prison onto the rock ledge before it fell into the bubbling lava below. When he landed, Lion-O pointed the Sword of Omens at Mumm-Ra and Torlei and let out a resounding shout of "Ho!" A blue beam shot from the Sword of Omens, stunning the undead pair, allowing the rest of them time to collect their weapons. Mumm-Ra and Torlei recovered quickly and fought back, resulting in a stalemate between them and the Thundercats and Lunatacs that lasted until the Thunderstrike arrived to turn the tide of battle. As always, the other Thundercats had seen the cat signal and came as soon as they could to aid their Lord.

Lynx-O, Tygra, and the Thunderkittens were in top form and came in with the Thunderstrike's guns blazing. Manning one of the pods with his sister behind him, WilyKat locked on the smaller and unfamiliar form beside Mumm-Ra and fired while Tygra attempted to target Mumm-Ra from the other pod. Tygra's shot missed, but WilyKat's was spot on, and the blast hit Torlei squarely in the back. The impact sent her over the rocky ledge and plunging right into the heart of the volcano she and Mumm-Ra intended to seal the Thundercats and Lunatacs in. She let out an unearthly screech as she fell, and then vanished. Despite all that had happened, Alluro still saw the sister he almost had back rather than someone who had just tried to kill them all, and he ran to the edge shouting her name. When he reached it, he saw nothing but the fiery pit below and no trace of her.

While that happened, Lion-O blasted Mumm-Ra in the chest with the Sword of Omens, knocking him backwards. Realizing that he had lost and that his partner was gone, he had no choice but to retreat and regroup. He reverted into his mummy form cursing the days that each of his foes had been born, and flew back into the air to return to his pyramid. He did not sense Torlei's presence, and he supposed that she had met her end when she fell into the volcano. Immortal or not, he knew that young immortals were considerably weaker than ones as old as himself, and if her body was too damaged to reconstruct itself then she would not be able to survive. It left him with a disturbing sense of regret, for another plan failed and another battle lost, and perhaps a very tiny bit for the loss of a partner whose potential he had never had the chance to truly explore.

Back on the volcano's side, Luna dug through Amok's saddle pouches until she found a remote controller that could summon the Lunattacker to come to them. "Thank the gods that the most

convenient volcanoes are on DarkSide," she muttered as she watched the Thundercats gather around the landing Thunderstrike now that Mumm-Ra had gone. Her own group was more scattered; TugMug and RedEye were close by, and Chilla was lingering behind them walking a bit slower due to the volcano's heat. Alluro was still at the volcano's edge, staring down at the lava seemingly transfixed. She was about to shout to him to snap out of it when the Lunattacker arrived. RedEye and TugMug wasted no time in getting in, while Chilla paused by Luna's side. "Where's Alluro?"

Amok pointed to the volcano edge, and Chilla sighed irritably. "It figures."

"Tell him that if he's not in here in two minutes we're leaving without him. I don't want to stay here and have the Thundercats decide we owe them some favor for their part in saving us, or try to get the better of us to 'rehabilitate' us while we're vulnerable now that they think we have redeeming traits or something ridiculous like that," Luna said with a roll of her eyes.

Chilla nodded, not bothering to argue the point that as an icewalker, the last place she wanted to go was closer to the lava. However, the heat was more tolerable to Chilla than more of Luna's hot air, so she went anyway. "Alluro, get up," she said as she approached. She grabbed his shoulder and shook it, and when he did not immediately answer, she yanked him to his feet away from the volcano's edge where the heat had her sweating rivers of cold water onto her dress.

"She died, again, and I didn't stop her. Again," Alluro lamented as Chilla dragged him further down the hill.

Chilla stopped only long enough to forcibly turn him toward her. "There's nothing you could've done. She's gone. Dwelling on it won't change anything." Giving advice and sympathy did not come naturally to Chilla, and it showed in the rare occasions she attempted to deliver it, such as that moment, although the oppressive heat made her words terser than they might have been elsewhere. "Listen to me," she said, lowering her voice and pulling him along again. "Torlei wasn't really alive, not like us. It was just some spell of Mumm-Ra's or his masters. Now let's get out of here before the Thundercats decide to kick us while we're down."

Alluro remained silent, but listened to her, and picked up his pace alongside her.

As their walk changed to a slow run, Chilla added, "Just let her go. You don't want to remember her like that."

"No," he said finally. "Pretty much everything that happened today is best left in the past. Let's get out of here." The two of them reached the Lunattacker and climbed in, and it wasted no time in speeding off back toward Skytomb.

The Thundercats stopped talking long enough to take note of the Lunatacs' hasty exit. "Hmph," WilyKat remarked. "The least they could've done is thank us. We did save them too."

"Thanks isn't anything I'd ever expect from one of them anyway," WilyKit said with a shrug.

Tired from the events of the day, Lion-O leaned against the Thunderstrike's door. "Well, I have to admit that it was a joint effort getting out of there. If they hadn't distracted Torlei, I'm not so sure I'd have been able to call the Sword of Omens without them stopping me. That Thundrainium had us all really wiped out."

"Thank Jaga that it's all over with," Cheetara said with a weary sigh. "I don't think I like the idea of Mumm-Ra having a partner like him on a permanent basis."

Pumyra frowned. "Hey, what do you think happened to her? If she was Mumm-Ra's bride and ever-living like he is like she said, then she might still be alive, right?"

Panthro frowned, and then shook his head. "Even if she made it, she's got to be an ever-living charcoal briquette after that. I don't think we'll have to worry about her anytime soon."

Tygra climbed back into his seat in the Thunderstrike. "If she could've come out, we'd probably have seen her by now."

Nodding along with the other tiger, Bengali took the back seat of the Thunderstrike's main cabin. "I agree. And on that note, how about we discuss this back at the Tower of Omens... where there's air conditioning?"

Lynx-O chortled. "Indeed. Not only is the heat miserable, but the volcano smells terrible to someone with enhanced senses."

"Kind of like WilyKat after he eats too many of Robear Roberto's tacos!" WilyKit teased her brother.

"Shut up! Like yours doesn't stink," he quipped back.

Tygra laughed and gestured for the Thundercats to all squeeze in. There were not quite enough seats in the Thunderstrike for all of them, but they could fit in for a very cozy ride. "All right, we'll continue this debate back at the Tower too. I'll fly," Tygra volunteered. The Thundercats squished themselves into the Thunderstrike and took off into the darkening sky, bound for home. As they left, no one noticed two small hands grip the edge of the volcano, one after another, and a frail-framed, navy-blue clad figure climb out.

Many hours later, long after night had fallen across Third Earth and an ominous full moon shone in the starry skies above, Mumm-Ra half-asleep in his sarcophagus. He was about to slip into another deep death-like rest to recharge his powers and ponder the best way to strike back at the Thundercats when he heard a noise that stirred him back into full alertness. "Ma-Mutt," he called out, "is that you?"

A whine at the foot of the sarcophagus confirmed that it was not. Frowning, Mumm-Ra pushed the stone lid open and peered into the darkness of his chamber for any sign of the intruder.

A pair of blazing red eyes met his own. Mumm-Ra stepped closer and recognized the outline of his undead bride approaching. She moved slowly, and as she drew nearer he could see that she was somewhat burned, her hair and clothes charred, but not all that worse for the wear considering where she had been. "Hi honey, I'm home," Torlei greeted him, and let out a bone-chilling laugh.

The End