

Youthful Ambitions

By Cheezey

It was well after midnight when, on his way to get a midnight snack from Skytomb's kitchen, Alluro noticed Luna seated at one of the heavy metal tables they usually reserved for dining. Amok was curled up on a mat on the floor fast asleep while Luna sat upon her steed as her chair. Even when not in battle, she was rarely without him. While it was partly because of her dependency on him to get around, it was also the comfort of companionship. When it came down to it, Amok was one of the things that kept Luna sane, and he was the only being alive that she trusted.

Luna had a cup of tea in one hand, now only lukewarm instead of hot, and she was concentrating intensely on some computer printout while jotting notes on another. Her face was worn with a look of intense concentration that seemed only to enhance her harshly lined features. Alluro was surprised to see Luna up and about at this hour. Usually the Lunatac leader retired to her quarters about four to five Third Earth hours after sunset unless it was her turn to do the night shift watch. He stood in the doorway for a moment or two, deciding whether or not to say something to her (the last thing he wanted at this hour was to have her bitch at him for bothering her) but he chose to ask what she was up to anyway. Better to find out now if she was in the process of hatching some ridiculous scheme he was going to wind up involved in rather than have it sprung on him later, he figured. "Luna?" he called over.

The tiny Lunatac turned quickly, slightly startled by the voice, and set her tea down on the table. "Alluro," she replied in greeting, and motioned for him to join her. He walked over to the table and picked up one of the lowest stools, since they were the most comfortable at his height, and sat next to Luna and Amok. Once Alluro was seated, Luna pushed one of the computer printouts in front of him. "You're a scientist, Alluro, I need your opinion on something."

Alluro took the paper and raised a surprised eyebrow. Since when did know-it-all Luna need *his* opinion on something? It must be something that was of great interest to her, he realized, for normally she was too stuck on herself to actually consult with him on one of her "brilliant" ideas. "What is this?" he asked.

"Remember when we captured Lion-O after he had that strange condition which reverted him to childhood a couple of months ago?"

"How could I forget?" Alluro asked with a grumble. His shin had hurt for a few days thanks to a painful kick courtesy of the brat-sized version of the Thundercat Lord.

"Troublesome as he was, I wish we'd held him in our clutches longer, so we could have found out more about what caused that change in him."

Alluro nodded. He remembered her saying something to that effect at the time, that she wanted to know what made him younger so she could regain her own youth. "Whatever it was, I doubt

it's anything we would want. He was getting progressively younger, to the point where he would eventually have faded from existence altogether. Too bad he didn't."

"I believe I have found a way to do it," she replied, eyeing him with an intense gaze.

"Oh? How is that?"

"With this." She pointed to the printout she handed him earlier. "I've heard of strange age-altering places on this planet, so I did a little research on them. I collected information through scans and little bits and pieces of information we've gathered in Skytomb's logs about this planet's geography and lore. I have even questioned the Mutants about some of it, though I haven't told them what I need the information for."

"Places like what?" asked Alluro. "The Cave of Time? Doesn't that make you older instead of younger?"

"The Cave of Time is one, but there is a place mentioned in some Warrior Maiden legends that is the reverse—a fountain that can restore one to their youth if they bathe in or drink its waters."

Alluro frowned. "A fountain of youth? Give me a break, Luna. What planet *doesn't* have such a legend?"

"Well this one really has one," Luna snapped, somewhat annoyed by the other Lunatac's attitude. "The Mutants told me it exists."

"Pardon me if I don't take what Slythe says as high truth," he replied sarcastically. Like the rest of the Lunatacs, Alluro had little use for the Mutants, thinking of them as inferior and primitive. Vultureman was the only one he could stand at all, since he had proven to be somewhat useful at times—but even then, he was still far beneath the Lunatacs in superiority in his eyes. "Besides, Luna, why is it that important?"

"Don't you ever wish you could be young again, Alluro?"

Alluro shrugged. "Not really. My childhood is not something I wish to relive."

"I'm not talking about becoming a child. I'm talking simply regaining youth. How old are you exactly, Alluro? I may be older than you, but I know that you're old enough to feel the limitations that being less than youthful brings."

"I am 63 Lunar Plundarrian years old... I believe that's the equivalent of about 45 standard galacto years, give or take one or two. I'd have to do the calculations to be certain," he replied.

"As I thought," Luna replied with a nod. "I am not that far ahead of you at 80 Lunar Plundarrian years, or 56 galacto years, which I think are close to the cycle of this planet. You mean to tell me that you don't wish for the strength or stamina that you had in your early adulthood? That you don't feel aches where there never used to be any? Or tire in a situation where ten or fifteen

galacto years earlier you know it wouldn't have fazed you in the least? Surely you must notice more than just your thinning hair as a sign of advancing age?"

"I'll admit that I'm not as young as I once was, but I don't have a problem with it, Luna." He was irritated that she had the nerve to imply that he wasn't as good as he might have been in his younger days. He was certainly a far cry from her, withered and dependent upon Amok. Then again, Lunar-clan Lunatacs were physically the weakest Lunatac anyway, even in their prime. Even if he had been ten years older than her, he would still be in better shape, he thought arrogantly.

Luna ignored the attitude in Alluro's tone and continued. "I'm not saying you should have a problem with it. But don't you see how it might be nice to have the advantages of youth again? I know I do. And if you think about it, obtaining the youth-restoring waters of this fountain could have far greater benefits than even the initial payoff. We could become essentially immortal."

"Immortal?"

"Think about it. We drink the water to restore our bodies to the youthful state. Our constitution is made strong again, and we essentially take years off our life. When we find that another twenty years pass and we're back to where we started, we can simply return and take more. And so on and so on. We could be as ever-living as Mumm-Ra, but with none of his limitations. No Ancient Spirits of Evil to be bound to eternally, no pyramid to hide in to save our existence. We would be mortal in body, with a trick to keep us from never getting so old that we die. Doesn't that appeal to you? To live forever?"

Alluro thought for a moment, then frowned. "I suppose it could have its advantages, but I don't know if I like it. Somehow it just seems... wrong."

Luna laughed. "Since when do you care about things like what's right and what's wrong?"

"It's not so much morality as it is the idea of tampering with a natural balance of things. That's dangerous. A chemical that has properties to make such drastic changes to your body could have side effects. Think about it, Luna...if there wasn't something very wrong with the water in that fountain, why doesn't every sentient mortal creature on Third Earth partake of it? Perhaps it's because they know something we do not."

"Bah, primitive superstition. Lunatacs have no need to fear such things."

"Do the words 'Mad Bubbler' ring any bells, Luna?" Alluro suggested sarcastically.

Luna narrowed her eyes. "That was a minor error in judgement, but nothing that we couldn't handle. Besides, I researched this fountain carefully, Alluro. There is a legend about vicious supernatural winged snakes guarding the waters. I imagine that's why the creatures of Third Earth avoid the place, because they would probably be torn to pieces by these things if they tried to enter with only their primitive weaponry to protect them. We, however, have much more

advanced technology. Those creatures would be no challenge for the mighty Lunatacs of Plundarr."

"So you mean to bring us all on this little youth quest of yours, Luna?"

Luna blinked with surprise. "I would have thought you would all want to go. Restoring us to our prime would put us at a clear advantage over the Thundercats. Only Lion-O, Bengali, and Pumyra are at such an age among them. The others are at least in their late twenties in galacto years, if not their thirties. And the kittens still have several years before they reach their prime."

"All right, I'll go," Alluro agreed. "But don't count on me to touch any of that water until I know what it does. I'll let you be the willing guinea pig for that one," he said, getting to his feet. He was ready to retire to his quarters and indulge in a long rest after this discussion. Talking to Luna had a wearing effect on him. "When did you plan on carrying out this expedition, anyway?"

Luna smiled broadly, her eyes twinkling with wicked anticipation. "Tomorrow. The weather scanners indicate it will be decent weather, so I planned on making that our mission for the day. I was going to tell you all in the morning."

"Why am I not surprised?" Alluro muttered. Leave it to Luna to come up with something like that and spring it on them at the last minute. He turned and headed for the doorway. "See you in the morning, Luna." With that he left.

Still seated at the table, Luna reached down and prodded Amok to wake him up so that he could carry her to her quarters. Now that the plan was set, she would need her rest. Yes, tomorrow was going to be a promising day indeed.

By late morning Luna had all of the Lunatacs assembled in Skytomb's control room and was outlining her plan. Alluro seemed to be the only one with reservations about the plan. Chilla was all for it, though of the group she was the youngest and probably the one who least needed it. She was only 26 galacto years to begin with, so simply shaving a matter of seven or so off was rather trivial in Alluro's opinion. TugMug and RedEye also both thought it was a good plan, as both agreed that they would like the added strength that they had ten or fifteen galacto years earlier. Amok naturally said nothing, but Alluro figured that Luna would feed her steed a little of the water to ensure that he stayed young enough to keep up with her soon to be younger self.

Luna had already located the legendary fountain and had its location programmed into Skytomb's navigational computer so that setting course was simple. As they flew over, they made sure they had enough weaponry on them to combat the winged snake creatures. It was decided that they would go in on the Ice Runner and Lunattacker and shoot down as many as they could with those, and take care of any of the remaining ones with their powers when they got into the fountain itself. RedEye, Chilla, and TugMug would have no problems incapacitating them, but Luna, Amok, and Alluro were less equipped for such an operation. Alluro was not sure that they could be hypnotized, and Amok's only defense would be to strike them. Therefore it

was planned that Alluro and Amok would carry flasks and fill them with the magical waters so that the others could have some as well.

After a short while the control panel beeped to indicate they arrived at their destination. "We're there," TugMug informed everyone, and brought up the image of the place on the screen. It seemed to be an open temple of some sort, in ruins and covered with vines, but with a magnificent, if not somewhat worn, fountain flowing in the center. It was ominously quiet, but they all fully expected to be ambushed by the flying snakes. They probably simply rested until the fountain was trespassed upon.

"Let's not waste time, Lunatacs," Luna said authoritatively as she headed for the door. "We're not getting any younger... yet." They set the landing sequence for Skytomb and waited for it to land. Meanwhile the Lunatacs hurried to their respective vehicles—Luna, Amok, RedEye, and TugMug in the Lunattacker while Alluro and Chilla rode the Ice Runner—and took off as soon as the mighty mobile fortress touched ground.

Within minutes they roared into the confines of the ancient fountain, disrupting the peaceful tranquility of it. Almost immediately they saw several black, fluttering shadows seemingly emerge from the worn stone walls themselves and rush at the offending intruders, hissing venomously.

"The snakes!" exclaimed RedEye. "Let's fry them!" Both the Lunattacker and the Ice Runner opened fire on the creatures. Streaks of laser fire, their own high-pitched hum mixing with the dangerous hiss of the winged snakes, filled the ancient structure and burned the walls. Many of their shots hit the mark, and the floor was soon littered with the carcasses of dead snakes. There were still many more than they expected, however, and they spent a good twenty minutes firing upon the creatures and dodging their gleaming fangs, especially Alluro and Chilla in the open Ice Runner.

There were only about ten of the snakes left when a shot of laser fire struck part of the fountain itself. Luna let out a shriek of frustration and immediately ordered both vehicles to stop and cease fire. There was no way she was going to risk having the fountain itself destroyed.

"Luna, don't be ridiculous, there's only a few of them left, we can get them," Chilla argued over the communicator.

"Absolutely not," Luna squawked back. "If that fountain is destroyed, then this will all be for nothing, do you understand? We can deal with the remaining snakes on foot. Let's get that water now!"

"Fine," Chilla grumbled, and landed next to the Lunattacker, which was stopping near the archway that led into the place.

Once landed, they all gathered outside their vehicles. "All right, you know the plan," Luna told them. "Alluro, Amok, and I will get the water for ourselves and fill the flasks. You three will hold off the remaining snakes so they don't interfere with us, if they attack again."

"Which would be right about now," RedEye informed her, and pointed at the group of creatures which was about to dive-bomb them.

"GO!" Luna shrieked. Immediately Amok, with her atop him as always, and Alluro made a dash for the fountain while RedEye fired a blast of electric energy from his chest plate at the attacking snakes. TugMug began firing his gravity carbine, set on heavy, at them, while Chilla prepared to ice them when they got close enough.

Two of the snakes were dropped by RedEye's charge and TugMug's gravity beam successfully took out another, but the others scattered before they were hit. One made a strike at Chilla, which she swatted away with a fire-beam, but she avoided a bite only by inches. "I hate these bastards," hissed the frozen Lunatac.

"You're telling me," TugMug growled. "These are some of the hardest targets to hit that I've ever seen!"

RedEye hurled his Sidewinder at one, but missed. Moments later he ducked and ran out of the path of another. He muttered some Lunar Plundarrian curses that echoed the same sentiments of Chilla and TugMug.

Across the way, Alluro and Amok had reached the fountain. Alluro opened his flask and gently lowered it into the sparkling waters, but took care not to touch the liquid. He still did not trust the stuff and wasn't going to so much as let a drop touch him before he saw one of the others try it. He looked over to Luna and heard her ask Amok to pick her up and set her in the water so that she could wade in it, giving him specific instructions to pick her up the moment she gave the word, in case it started de-aging her too fast. He was curious to see what it would do.

Amok set Luna down in the edge of the fountain pool, where the water was shallow. It would have only been knee-deep to one of the others, but to Luna it went well above her waist. At first nothing happened, but then both Amok and Alluro were astonished to see Luna begin to change physically. Most noticeable was her face. The wrinkles and jowls that decorated her features began to firm and tighten, while the lines began to smooth and fade. Her lips grew fuller and her eyes wider. Next the color of her hair started to intensify, and then finally her body began to grow and strengthen. Her limbs toned and strengthened while her posture improved, adding a few inches to her height. Middle age flab gave way to a stronger, more healthy shape and her small and sagging breasts became more rounded and held higher on her now younger body.

Luna's eyes were wide with wonder and delight as she watched the cracked, aged skin of her hands give way to the smooth and delicate skin she had in her youth, and strength she hadn't felt in years coursed through her body. The tiny Lunatac leaped with joy. "Now, Amok, take me out!" She didn't want to leave, the waters of the fountain were so calm and inviting, but she did not want to get too much younger, lest she go too far. Obediently her steed lifted her from the water and set the now giddy Lunatac leader upon his back once more.

"Great Moons of Plundarr," Alluro murmured. He capped the now full flask in his hand and reached for the second one he carried, dipping that into the water absentmindedly and filling it as

well. Now that he'd seen what it did for Luna, he was beginning to change his earlier view on the youth-restoring water. It certainly wouldn't *hurt* to take fifteen or so years off his age, he thought.

RedEye, TugMug, and Chilla missed Luna's transformation. TugMug was firing at two snakes that had cornered him, while Chilla and RedEye were too busy running like hell from a group of four fast-diving snakes that were pursuing them. They were moving too fast for them to have time to stop and regroup long enough to fire any sort of counterattack, and at the moment Chilla was using all of her breath for running. She couldn't have spit ice if she wanted to—which she certainly did.

"Too damned fast," growled RedEye between gasps for breath. "Alluro and Luna better get a hell of a lot of that water for us."

"If this doesn't work I'm going to freeze Luna's miserable ass into next—AAAAH!" Chilla was cut off one of the snakes' fangs grazed her arm. She yelped and flailed, stumbling into RedEye. Immediately a snake dove for RedEye's leg, which he countered with a hard kick upward. He avoided a bite, but the force of his kick sent both him and Chilla tumbling backwards and into the fountain water. They didn't have time to react to that knowledge as snakes started swarming around their head. Quickly both got to their feet and ran for the center of the fountain where the flowing water was, thinking they could use it shield them from the snakes and splash at them as an added defense.

TugMug, now having taken care of the two pests that had been bothering him, fired at the snakes after Chilla and RedEye and trapped them in a gravity field. It then struck him just how much of an exposure to that water that his fellow Lunatacs were getting. "Chilla! RedEye! Get out of there!" he shouted to them.

Alluro whirled around when he heard TugMug's shouts and saw in horror how far into the fountain Chilla and RedEye were, and that they were being doused in the age-reducing water. Knowing what just a little wading had done to Luna, who was a good twenty years senior to Chilla and probably at least fifteen to RedEye, he had a pretty good idea what would happen to them if they didn't get out. Though he was not a heroic type by any stretch, Alluro did care what happened to the others to an extent, especially Chilla. He'd always enjoyed her companionship and did not want to see such a fate befall her. Immediately Alluro dropped the flask in his hand and ran into the fountain. He knew the risk he was taking, but he knew he was fairly fast, and if he ran, a minimal amount of it would touch him. Besides, he had just been thinking a little of the water wouldn't hurt.

Alluro reached the center of the fountain a few seconds later. Acting on adrenaline he grasped Chilla's arm in one hand and RedEye's in the other. "Move it!" he ordered them, breaking back into a run. They stumbled and splashed, and though he was too concerned simply with getting out of the fountain to notice, they were not running with him. They were being dragged.

Once he was near to the edge of the fountain, Alluro jumped out and two weights—much lighter than they should have been—came out with him and landed with a thud on the stone floor next to

him. It was then, while Alluro was catching his breath, that he first heard the high-pitched wail next to him.

"WAAAAAHHHHHH!"

"What the...?" Alluro, still slightly winded, looked over to see what was making the shrill cry, when his jaw dropped in utter shock.

"Holy Sh—"

Luna silenced TugMug with a gasp. "Chilla? RedEye?" Even in her new youth, her voice was still shrill as ever in its surprise.

"It—it can't be," Alluro muttered. Where Chilla should have been was a tiny frozen Lunatac child, no more than two at the oldest, wailing her lungs out as she flailed helplessly in the wet clothes that had once been on her body. "Chilla?" He blinked and rubbed his eyes, then quickly turned to see if RedEye was all right.

He wasn't. The waters of the fountain had worked their magic on RedEye too. A wiry young Lunatac boy, perhaps about six galacto years in age, was sitting in the Lunatac's place. He was trembling and seemed quite startled and shaken. Alluro swallowed back a feeling of dread and slowly got to his feet, looking from the baby Chilla to the young RedEye in utter astonishment. "RedEye... Chilla... It can't be them..." He knew it was, of course, but he couldn't quite bring himself to acknowledge that yet.

"Who else could it be?" Luna asked quietly.

TugMug shook his head in disbelief. "That water is powerful stuff."

"But that powerful?" Alluro replied, still in shock.

"Look what it did to me," Luna said with a gesture that displayed her new younger form.

"And look what it did to you," TugMug added to Alluro.

"To me?" Alluro asked, as if the possibility of it doing something to him had just now occurred. He took a few steps toward the water to see his reflection. He did feel a little different, but that could be remaining traces of adrenaline, he reasoned. "But I barely touched it, TugMug, I was only in it for—dear gods..." he whispered, interrupting himself as he caught sight of his reflection.

"Told you."

Alluro was too shocked to reply. The face that stared back at him from the water was not one that had looked back at him in the mirror for a good twenty years. His features were the same, but with fewer lines. His head, previously quite bald at the top, was now covered by a thick mane of

hair. It was still as long as what he had before he'd gone into the fountain and was now a somewhat darker and more vibrant gray, just as it had been in his youth. Much like many species had their hair gray as they aged, Lunatacs instead experienced color fading. The gray itself was simply a natural color for his race. He then noticed other changes, that his muscles were a little better defined and that he had significantly less weight in his midsection. In fact, he looked just as he had when he was the equivalent of 18 galacto years old.

Luna let out a laugh. "Alluro, I've never seen you look so good. What the hells happened to you?"

He whirled around and glared at her. "Shut up, Luna! I see age-reversal has done nothing for your personality," he snapped.

TugMug looked over the youth-affected Lunatacs thoughtfully. "So what do we do now, Luna? What do we do with them?" He gestured to Chilla and RedEye.

Alluro looked away from his reflection and rejoined the others. "Yes, that's a problem. I'd also like to know why it affected me this much. Chilla and RedEye were essentially bathing in that water. They may have even ingested some. I can see why they were so affected, but I merely ran through it. Why was my change still so dramatic?"

"Your clothes," Luna replied suddenly. "Your clothing is soaked, if it's on them and it's touching your skin, odds are it's still affecting you."

Alluro looked down at his clothing. She was right. He was dripping wet.

"So," Luna continued with a mischievous gleam in her eye, "I guess you'll be going back to Skytomb without it, unless you want to look like them." She pointed to the mini Lunatacs that were once Chilla and RedEye.

"Oh, man," muttered TugMug, rolling his eyes and making a face.

As much as he hated to admit it, Luna was right. "Need a cheap thrill, do you Luna?" he retorted as he began to strip. The younger Luna gave him a disgusted look, probably because he hit a nerve, he mused, a fact he found rather amusing. Then something else occurred to him. "Wait a second... if my clothing is affecting me, then Chilla and RedEye..."

Immediately they focused their attention on the two children. They had not reverted any further, but it was obvious why. While they had been talking, the baby Chilla had wriggled out of what had once been her dress (for it was naturally now far too big for her) and was crawling around the stone patio in her birthday suit. RedEye had not been wearing much clothing to begin with, and it was made of a material that dried quickly anyway. What he was wearing—his chest plate, briefs, boots, and gloves—all hung loose on his childlike body anyhow, with very little of it touching his skin.

"This is a real mess," TugMug said. "What are we supposed to do with them?"

Alluro kicked off the last of his water-tainted clothing and tossed it to TugMug to carry in his gauntleted hand. He then bent over to retrieve his psyche club, only to hear a wolf-whistle from Luna's direction. He whirled around and glared at the troll—though he at least had to admit she was now a somewhat pretty troll—and stood back up.

"Sorry," Luna said with a giggle. "Don't know what's come over me."

"Well I hope it goes away," TugMug muttered. He did not like seeing all of his fellow Lunatacs acting—or looking—like this. "And you still haven't answered me, Luna. What are we going to do with RedEye and Chilla?"

Alluro walked over to the baby Chilla and picked her up. The tiny ice Lunatac groped at his face with her fingers and squirmed, babbling in what seemed like almost words, but were really just a sort of baby talk. He noticed that his friend was an adorable child—though oddly Alluro usually detested children—but her wide-eyed baby smile only brought him a feeling of sadness. *Poor Chilla*, he thought. *Look what's become of you*. "We take them back to Skytomb, what else?"

"Back to Skytomb? A couple of kids?" TugMug replied incredulously.

"They were part of our team," Luna answered. "And if we leave them here they'll die, either they'll drown in the fountain or be snake food if more of those snakes show up."

"Besides, there may be a way to reverse it," Alluro added. He wasn't sure how, though, and after this fiasco he was hesitant to mess with the Cave of Time. He would hate to see Chilla put in there only to become withered and old or even worse. At least this way she would still live. "We should at least try. At any rate, let's get out of here. I'd like to put on some dry clothes, if you don't mind."

TugMug bounced over to where the young RedEye was standing. "RedEye, let's go."

"Okay TugMug," the boy agreed. "What's going on? I don't like this."

"You mean you don't remember?" Luna asked with astonishment.

"Not really," the young RedEye answered. "Chilla and I were being chased by snakes and then the water... I used to be old like you guys. I don't know how to get back. I want to get back."

"What do you think we're talking about doing?" Luna answered irritably. The boy RedEye seemed intimidated by her tone and looked away. In retrospect Luna supposed she shouldn't have been so short with the child, but it was too late now. Dealing with children was never her strong suit anyhow.

"Odd," Alluro said quietly. "It seems he's reverted to the mental age appropriate to his body size, but has retained the consciousness and memory of before. Only he's processing it through the mind of a six year old."

"You mean he's still RedEye?"

"Yeah, I am!" RedEye piped up indignantly.

"A child version of RedEye, but still him. Same personality, same thoughts, same memories... just a boy instead of an adult. I imagine the same has happened to Chilla, though there's no way to really tell with her this young," Alluro answered, giving the baby Lunatac he was carrying a sad look.

"So why are you and Luna still all right?" TugMug pressed.

"Alluro and I are still adults, just younger adults. Our own mental states may have reverted appropriately to our age, but it's still an adult state. Therefore our own behavior would not be altered, am I right?"

Alluro nodded. "I think so, Luna."

Young RedEye looked up at the elder Lunatacs with a somber, worried expression. It was one that seemed out of place on a face so young, but could only be expected after what he had just experienced. "Can you fix me?" he asked them.

"We'll try," Alluro told him. "Let's get back to Skytomb and see what we can figure out."

Luna nodded and had Amok lead the way back to the vehicles. Alluro climbed into the Ice Runner, since Chilla certainly could not pilot it herself. He strapped the baby Chilla into the seat beside him and took off, while the others got into the Lunattacker. TugMug sat in the driver's seat, while Luna sat in the front next to him. Amok squeezed in the back next to the young RedEye. They had barely cleared the temple exit when RedEye spoke up.

"Luna, are we there yet?"

Luna groaned and snapped at the boy. "No RedEye, now be patient. We've hardly been in here for a minute!"

"It didn't feel this long before," he said grouchy. "I want Alluro to fix me now."

TugMug turned around long enough to glare at RedEye. "If you don't shut up, *I'll* fix you," he threatened.

RedEye slunk back into his seat and stared sullenly at the rotund driver once his back was turned again. "Fat jerk," he mumbled. The remaining three minutes of the ride passed in silence.

After they returned to Skytomb and set course for DarkSide once more, the remaining adult Lunatacs minus Alluro gathered in the control room. RedEye and Chilla were there as well, not so much out of the adults wanting them there as them not having anywhere convenient to leave Chilla and not being able to stop RedEye from following them around. Chilla was seated in a

deep-cushioned chair that she wouldn't be able to crawl out of easily while RedEye was absorbed in playing one of Skytomb's computer games. At first Luna had hollered at him for touching the computer, but after TugMug rudely pointed out that even as a six-year-old he probably could get it to work better than she ever did, she let the issue drop. Besides, if the boy's attention was absorbed in some game, then it wouldn't be on pestering her, and that in and of itself was reason enough to let him be. A few minutes later, after a short visit to his quarters to get some dry clothing, Alluro joined the others.

"All right," Luna said impatiently as he walked into the room, "we have to fix this mess, and now. Skytomb is no place for children!"

"For once Luna is right. I don't want them here like this, they will just get in our way. We need an antidote, and now."

Suddenly Amok clamped his hand over his small nose and frowned. "Yuck," he commented.

Luna patted her steed on the head sympathetically. "I agree, Amok, this whole situation stinks."

Almost as soon as she'd spoken the words, the undeniable odor of excrement permeated the room. TugMug winced. "That's not the only thing that stinks! What is that? Did someone step in something on the way in?"

The question was answered by a loud cry from the other side of the room. Immediately turning to see what it was, the adults got their answer when they saw the baby Chilla, still naked as when they had brought her in, wailing and sitting in a warm, wet puddle on the vinyl chair.

Alluro made a disgusted face. "Didn't any of you think to put a diaper on her before now?" he accused.

"Sorry, I've never had to housebreak a Lunatac before," Luna snapped sarcastically. "Besides, *you* could have done it!"

"Excuse me, Luna, but I was busy trying to find something to wear after *your* ridiculous mission went all to the hells in a handbasket!" retorted Alluro.

"So now it's *my* fault that Chilla and RedEye were too stupid to stay out of the water? I don't think so!" Luna shrieked. "So why don't you just shut your trap and do something about it, instead of complaining to me!"

"If you think I'm cleaning that mess, you've got another thing coming, Luna. Besides, I believe traditionally that changing diapers is a woman's job, so do us all a favor and make yourself useful for once," Alluro snapped angrily.

Luna went livid with rage at his sexist remark. "WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAT?"

Any further exchange was interrupted when TugMug let out an infuriated roar. The gravity race Lunatac's short fuse had already been lit by the tension and the combined unpleasantness of the situation, but this little shouting match on top of Chilla's incessant and rising wails pushed him to the limit. "I don't give a damn which one of you does it, but if one of you doesn't shut that brat up this instant, I'm going to flatten her lungs with the gravity carbine so her screaming won't be an issue at all!" He raised the weapon and aimed at Chilla, intent on firing.

"You will do no such thing!" Alluro snarled at TugMug, shoving his gravity carbine aside. He then went over to the chair where Chilla sat, crying and squirming around helplessly. Despite his revulsion at what was now covering a good half of her tiny body, he plucked her off of the chair and stormed out of the room.

"Where do you think you're going?" Luna demanded.

Alluro stopped in the doorway long enough to answer. "I'm going to find something to put on Chilla to ensure that this doesn't happen again, and then I will be in my lab, trying to find a cure for your damned youth water. In the meantime, I suggest one of you clean that mess up."

Unfazed by Alluro's parting outburst, Luna gave TugMug an authoritative look. "Well, TugMug, get to it!"

"Forget it, Lu—" TugMug was cut off by a loud siren-like alarm erupting at full volume from all the speakers.

"What is that?" Luna asked, clenching her hands over her ears. Amok mirrored her gesture. "Oooh, noise, too much noise," he muttered.

All three of them looked around again, and at the same time saw what had caused it. RedEye had apparently finished his game and was toying with the alarm panel, snickering childishly at their reaction to the sudden noise. At least, he was snickering until he saw the murderous looks on the faces of his now-elder Lunatacs. "Uh oh," he muttered.

"You brat!" raged TugMug.

Luna was no less displeased. "What's gotten into you, RedEye? You think this is funny?"

The comically distorted faces of the infuriated TugMug and Luna were too much for RedEye, and the sheer silliness of their appearance overrode his fear of their tempers just long enough for him to let out a loud laugh.

"I'll show you funny!" TugMug threatened, raising his fist. He bent down, preparing to bounce across the room and pound some sense into the boy Lunatac, but RedEye saw it coming. The little Lunatac leapt back from the computer console like it was on fire and made a break for the door. By the time TugMug landed, his weight shaking the floor as he hit from the sheer force of it, RedEye was already out of the room and halfway to the lift that would take him to the upper levels.

Across the room Amok wordlessly mopped up Chilla's mess with a rag. Luna sat silently atop him, gripping the steadying horn of her steed with one hand and buried her face in the other, fighting back tears of fury and frustration.

In the relative quiet and sanctity of his lab, Alluro wrung out the damp, warm washcloth in his hand and gently wiped it across the pale blue skin of the baby Chilla on the table in front of him.

Once away from the chaos of the control room, the child had stopped her sobbing. It was something that Alluro was quite thankful for, as it was now quite obvious to him that if he didn't take charge of caring for Chilla while she was stuck in this regressed state, no one would. He supposed it could be worse. She wasn't wailing any longer, and once he got her cleaned up she wouldn't stink anymore either. The baby was grateful for his attentions, and looked up at her caretaker with an eerie innocence and helplessness in her hauntingly young eyes. Immediately he looked away. The sight unnerved him too much.

He focused instead on wringing out the washcloth under the faucet again. The smell of urine still clung to the air a little bit, but it wasn't as bad as it had been when he brought her in here. A scowl crossed his now younger features as he played over the earlier scene in the control room. He didn't usually get this angry at Luna, he certainly was used to her obnoxious ways, but for some reason he was having a harder time keeping a lid on his temper than usual. He wondered briefly if it had something to do with that youth-restoring water, bringing back the boldness and arrogance of young adulthood that he might have lost over the past twenty or so years. It didn't really matter. Even if he had been twenty years older instead of younger, he still would have been furious at them. He could only imagine what the Chilla he knew would do to Luna and TugMug if she found out how neglectful and vicious they had been to her while she was stuck as a baby. The thought of her exacting revenge brought a brief but decidedly wicked smile to his face.

Alluro turned back to the table and reached for Chilla. She groped at his arm with her tiny fingers and made strange noises that he could classify only as 'baby noise'. It wasn't even a sort of talk, so much as a combination of blurps and gurgles and giggles that made no sense. He turned her over and wiped her with the washcloth some more and sighed. This fiasco was not a high moment in Lunatac history, that was for certain. "Don't worry Chilla, I won't think any less of you because of this," he told her with a resigned smile. "But I am going to make sure Luna gets stuck with this job next time. And you make sure you leave your diaper nice and full for her, all right?"

The baby Chilla simply cooed and smiled.

Alluro patted the short white hair on top of her head affectionately. "Good girl." He then tossed the dirty washcloth in the sink, and made a mental note to throw it in with Luna's laundry, too. "Now you stay there, don't move," he told her, using a bit of hypnotic tone for good measure. He then walked over to one of the closets in his lab and began rummaging through odds and ends, looking for something suitable to use as a makeshift diaper. He found a few rags, but they were oil-stained and grimy, and he figured he'd better not use those. With his luck, Chilla would

recover, remember, and pay him back with some frostbite where the sun didn't shine for such an offense.

After a more thorough search, he located a towel, which he shred into three pieces that would serve as three of them. He figured it probably wouldn't hurt to have spares on hand after seeing the mess in the control room. He set about assembling the diaper, and after some effort and a few sad tries, he finally got it so it looked right and looked like it would hold. Not knowing what else to do with her, he set a pillow in a box and set her inside it as a makeshift crib. He hoped she would fall asleep so he would be able to analyze the water—and perhaps figure out an antidote—in peace.

Meanwhile, young RedEye had made his way down to the kitchen after spending an hour or so hiding from Luna and TugMug. Though his outlook had changed with his age, he retained enough memory of his fellow Lunatacs and their personalities to know that they had probably calmed down enough that they wouldn't shoot on sight any longer. Besides, he was hungry.

He went into the chilled storage room that they used to store their food in and looked around. He saw plenty of interesting stuff, but was quite frustrated to discover that he was now too short to reach most of it. Most of the open containers were on shelves just out of his reach, since even the shorter Lunatacs (Luna and TugMug) had a means of getting them easily, thanks to either a full-time ride or natural springs in the legs.

RedEye grumbled to himself but decided to give it a try anyway, and climbed on one of the sealed metal bins for balance. He got on his tiptoes and was just about to reach a container of Luna's stew (surprisingly enough, Luna wasn't a half bad cook when she bothered to make something) when he lost his footing and tumbled to the floor taking half the shelf with him. The stew dumped onto the floor, a box of ground grain burst open and dusted the entire room, and even worse, he knocked over a nearly full flask of TugMug's ale, drenching himself in it.

"Yuck!" he exclaimed, then looked around sheepishly. TugMug was going to be furious. He remembered that the ale was his favorite beverage, and that he treasured it highly since it was difficult for him to get—or more accurately, steal—on a regular basis. "I'll just say Amok did it," he decided aloud, and headed for the door with plans to make an escape. That is, until something caught his eye.

It was the most beautiful thing a six-old-could see. It was a giant, meant-for-Amok-sized candyfruit-flavored lollipop. "Mmmmm...." Immediately he snatched it and shoved as much as he could into his mouth. RedEye had found his dinner.

Alluro was deeply absorbed in his analysis of the youth water when there was a loud knock on the door. He ignored it. He had answered a similar knock about twenty minutes earlier, only to find no one there when he opened it, along with an annoying childlike giggle from the shadows

in the hallway. Had it happened only once, he might have found it amusing. But when it happened a second time, he had warned the offending "mystery knocker" that if he caught whoever was behind the childish game that he would lock him in Castle Plundarr's basement for a week. There were no more knocks for several minutes until now.

Determined not to indulge RedEye's bratty prank, Alluro ignored it. The baby Chilla had just fallen asleep and he did not want her to wake up and distract him further from his work. Then a few seconds later, the knock came again, louder and more insistent. He made a face as he jotted some notes of his findings, but did not acknowledge it. Then the knock turned into a loud and impatient bang, followed by a shrill familiar shriek that made him wince. "ALLURRRRRRO! WHAT ARE YOU DOING IN THERE?"

He slammed his pen down on the bench and opened the door. "Be quiet, Luna!" he hissed as he poked his head through the door and into the hallway, where Luna—who he was still somewhat startled and surprised to see as a young version of herself—was waiting with Amok. "Chilla just fell asleep and I don't want her woken up yet."

"Fine," Luna said shortly, lowering her voice to a baby-safe level. "I just wanted know if you've got any ideas yet."

"Not really," Alluro answered with a sigh. "I've been running diagnostic tests on the chemical structure of that water and there is a strange component to it that I can't identify, and I'm sure it's that anomaly that causes the age-reversal."

"Do you know how it works?"

"I think so, but keep in mind that biology isn't my area of expertise, Luna. I'm more familiar with more technical things like chemistry and physics as far as my scientific knowledge is concerned."

Luna tapped her foot on the back of Amok's horn impatiently. "Whatever. You're still the closest thing we have to an expert on this, so out with it. Do you know how it works, and can you reverse it?"

Alluro motioned for her and Amok to follow him into the laboratory. He indicated for them to be quiet as they did so, pointing at the sleeping Chilla in the box on the other side of the room. Once he was back at his bench, he picked up the notes he'd jotted down thus far. "The structure I found is unlike anything I've ever seen or heard of before. It almost has the structure of some sort of enzyme or chemical, though far more intricate and complex than anything I've heard of. Now here's the strange part... when it interacts with cellular tissue, a fragment of this... substance... triggers a reaction that actually rewrites the DNA in the cells at an alarming rate. That is what produces the side effect of actually making the body younger."

"Can it be reversed?"

Alluro let out a hollow laugh and set his notepad down. "It shouldn't even be *possible* by any known law of biology, Luna. I've never heard of cells that alter that quickly, at least not without destroying the entire organism in the process. I also can't imagine what it does to the DNA to bring about that exact change, or why a single exposure to the skin is enough to alter even the innermost internal cells of the body. Not to mention the question of why it would act that quickly and then stop within seconds of being taken away from the exposure, when the material is still very much present in the cells. Without understanding why all of that is possible, how can you expect me to know how to create something that can successfully do the same thing, only in reverse?"

"Well, can't you just rip this stuff out of the DNA? Shouldn't *that* reverse it?"

Alluro gave Luna a nasty smile. "Would you like to volunteer to be my guinea pig? I'm sure being dissected and probed cell by cell to get every last fragment of that stuff out of your entire cellular makeup ought to be a lot of fun," he said sarcastically.

"Oh," Luna muttered, realizing the error of her suggestion. "So what you're saying is that as far as you're concerned, producing a cure is hopeless."

"In a nutshell, yes."

Luna closed her eyes and looked away for a moment, then met his eyes again. "Then we have no choice but to consider alternatives."

"Like what?" Alluro asked, a challenging tone in his voice.

"We have to ask for help."

"Help?" Alluro repeated. "From where? Who would you expect—or even ask—to help us?"

"The Mutants," Luna replied. She noted the shocked and disgusted look on Alluro's face at such a suggestion, but continued before he could put up an argument. "I don't like it any more than you do, but they have spent more recent time than we have on this planet and may know something we don't. Perhaps the Cave of Time... you've heard of the legends. The aging powers of that place might be able to reverse the effects of that water."

"Or it might age Chilla and RedEye into worn piles of bones even more withered than that miserable Mumm-Ra. I don't like it, Luna. At least their lives aren't in jeopardy as children."

"Until the next time TugMug loses his temper, perhaps."

Alluro frowned. "There must be a better way."

"Mumm-Ra might—"

"The hells with that. You know what happens when we ask that bag of bones for anything—he expects to be paid back tenfold. I for one would rather die than ask him for anything, and I am pretty sure Chilla or RedEye would say the same if they could."

"Yeah, Mumm-Ra's a dork!" a young voice piped up from the end of the hallway.

Neither Alluro, Luna, nor Amok could resist a grin at hearing the child-RedEye refer to the evil demon priest in such a way. "Perceptive, isn't he?" remarked Alluro.

"When he's not being a pest," Luna agreed.

"You're not gonna make me go see Mumm-Ra are you?" RedEye asked, frowning.

"No," Alluro said before Luna could say anything.

"We're going to Castle Plundarr instead," Luna added, giving Alluro a look of aggravation for interrupting her.

"Castle Plundarr?" whined RedEye. "But that place smells worse than TugMug's bathroom!"

Alluro resisted an urge to snicker, as the statement was probably true, then looked around.

"Where is TugMug, anyway? Shouldn't he be in on this little plan?"

"I'll find him and tell him about it," Luna said. "In the meantime, you go to the control room and set course for Castle Plundarr. RedEye, I want you to remain here while the three of us deal with the mutants. Someone needs to watch Chilla anyhow, and I doubt the mutants would appreciate a boy tagging along." She tapped Amok and started down the hallway. She was almost to the door before she turned around and added, "And this place had *better* be in one piece when we get back... or else! Understand?"

RedEye nodded, rolling his eyes the way a child who is bored of being lectured by a long-winded adult would. "Yeah Luna," he said unenthusiastically.

Luna left, then Alluro went into his lab. He emerged a few seconds later with Chilla, still asleep in her box. "Here's Chilla. It'll only take about ten minutes to get to Castle Plundarr, so I'll give her to you now."

RedEye took hold of the box, heavier than he thought it would be, and grunted as he struggled to carry it. "She's heavy. I thought babies were light."

Alluro shrugged and smiled. "All the more reason to leave her be, then. Oh, and remember RedEye—she's fragile. Be careful with her, or I'm sure I don't have to tell you how displeased I will be with you," he warned. RedEye remembered Alluro's earlier threat about the basement and gave the much taller Lunatac a nod of agreement. "Good." With that, Alluro also left, bound for the control room.

Alone in the hallway with the baby in the box, RedEye pouted. He couldn't quite make sense of it, but he knew he hated how the others were treating him—like he was some sort of nuisance or pest. Sure something had happened to him... but wasn't he still one of them? Why were they acting like he was so inferior or stupid now? *It's because I'm a kid*, he thought resentfully. His memory was distorted and unclear, but he was pretty sure that if he hadn't been changed in that fountain that they wouldn't be talking to him like that. It made him mad. "I'll show them," he said aloud quietly, though no one but the baby Chilla was around to hear it. He then took the heavy box in his arms and went down the hallway to the west corridor lift.

One quarter of a Third Earth hour later Skytomb touched down on the swampy, ugly grounds of Castle Plundarr. The dark gargoyle spire stood out sharply against the hazy green fog as Luna, Amok, Alluro, and TugMug walked along the muddy path toward the place. The air, cool now that sunset was upon them, was thick with moisture and the unpleasant scent of mildew and rot. Alluro, ahead of the other three by several steps, caught a strong whiff of something even worse festering in their moat, and fought back a gag reflex. He despised the mutants on a good day, but voluntarily visiting them to ask for help of all things had to be a new low, he thought.

He was the first to arrive at their doorstep, and was greeted by a warning shot of laser fire at his feet. "Halt, Lunatac," Slythe's raspy voice called out over a loudspeaker. "Who are you and why are you here?"

Alluro frowned. "Who do you think it is, mutant?" he retorted angrily. "It's Alluro, and I don't take kindly to being fired upon by a so-called ally."

There was some murmuring in the background, and Alluro thought he could make out the trademark speech patterns of all four of the mutant 'commanders', until Slythe addressed him again. "You're no Alluro that *I* know, Lunatac. Now don't play games, who are you?" the reptile demanded.

It then dawned on him. The youth water. These mutants probably didn't recognize him being over twenty years younger than when they had last seen him. "It's me, Slythe. I had a slight accident and—"

"What's the hold up?" Luna screeched impatiently as she, Amok, and TugMug finally caught up. "We need to talk to you, Mutants! This is important!"

"Luna, is that you?" Jackalman's voice asked over the loudspeaker, clearly astonished.

"Hoo hoo, can't be, she looks too good," Monkian commented.

TugMug raised his gravity carbine and fired it at one of the speakers, taking it out of commission. "Enough of this, let us in, or we'll use Skytomb to blast our way in. Got it?"

"All right, you may enter, yessss," Slythe answered with a grumble. The doors slid open, and the four of them ventured inside. The Lunatacs were greeted in the main hallway by the four mutants, who eyed them with shock and surprise.

"Cawww, that wasn't a monitor malfunction," Vultureman remarked. "You do look different. What happened?"

"Did you try a hair tonic?" Jackalman inquired to Alluro, not even meaning for it to come out as snide as it did. When Alluro answered him with an angry and silent glare, the canine couldn't help but laugh. "Nyah-ha-ha, well at least it worked, eh?"

"Shut up, we don't have time for this," Luna snapped. "We had an accident at the fountain that restores youth."

Monkian frowned. "You mean the Geyser of Youth? I've heard of that place, a contact of mine told us about that once."

"That's the one," Luna said. "I went there for my own purposes—and as you can see it worked quite nicely—but we had some unforeseen complications."

TugMug nodded and continued. "RedEye and Chilla were drenched in the stuff and—"

"Cawwww, it turned them into kids?" Vultureman asked incredulously, then burst out laughing at the visualization of what he imagined the child Lunatacs would look and act like. The other mutants shortly followed suit.

"This is not funny!" howled Luna.

"Now there's an understatement," Alluro muttered.

"What do you want us to do about it, yesss?" Slythe asked, still smirking. "Donate diapers?" That sparked another round of vicious laughter.

"We were hoping you would know a remedy for it," Alluro said, purposefully ignoring the comment.

Slythe silenced the laughter of the others for a moment and looked over the Lunatacs before him. "For yourselves? Or just for RedEye and Chilla?"

"Does it really matter? Just tell us!" Alluro clenched his fists. He was now being reminded in stereo of why he detested the mutants as much as he did.

"Watch your tone with me, Lunatac," warned Slythe. "You may be younger than you usssed to be, but I can still easily overpower you if I wanted to, yesss."

"Give me a break, mutant. You wouldn't stand a chance."

"SILENCE!" Luna hollered. Amok accentuated her order with a loud and threatening growl. "This is not the time or the place. We came here for answers, so tell us what we need to know and we will be on our way, Slythe."

"Why don't you just, awwwk, use the Cave of Time?"

"Hoo, they can't, Vultureman," Monkian interrupted. "Mika told me it was destroyed in a cave-in after the Earthquake that sector had a couple weeks back."

TugMug gave Monkian a strange look. "Mika?"

"Nyah, you mean your girlfriend," Jackalman replied with a grin.

"Is not," Monkian argued, a dark look crossing his features. "She's just someone I know. An ex-scout from the Warrior Maiden tribe."

"Ex?" inquired Luna.

"Willa banished her for violating some code. I don't know. It doesn't matter," Monkian said with a shrug. "That's just what she told me when I saw her a few days ago. She was in that region and said it was sealed off by a rockslide."

Luna sighed. "There goes that plan, then."

"It would sssseem you're stuck then, yessss?"

"Hmm, perhaps I could invent something," Vultureman suggested.

Alluro balked at that idea. "Thanks but no thanks, we don't have any desire to blow RedEye or Chilla to bits."

Vultureman indignantly put his hands on his hips. "Well have it your way then, it was only a friendly offer. Seeing as you're too incompetent to find a scientific cure yourself, I'd imagine, otherwise you wouldn't be here."

Infuriated by the insult, Alluro reached for his psyche club and pointed it in a threatening gesture at the bird mutant. "You have a lot of nerve, bird. I will not tolerate such insolence from a *mutant* of all people."

"If we are so beneath you, then why don't you all just get lost then?" growled Slythe. "You came here asking us for help, remember?"

"And what a waste of time that was," TugMug sneered.

"We won't darken your home sweet home any longer then, Slythe," Luna told him with heavy sarcasm in her voice. "Come on, Lunatacs."

"Amok leave," Luna's steed echoed, already carrying his tiny mistress to the door. Alluro and TugMug, in full agreement with their leader for once, eagerly followed suit.

While Luna and the others were out having a friendly "talk" with the Mutants, RedEye, still lugging around the Baby-Chilla-In-A-Box like so much excess baggage, sat by himself in the control room, scowling. The boy Lunatac was still furious at how the others were treating him. How dare they dismiss him like he was not even there, or even worse, an inconvenience? Just because he was a boy now it didn't mean he was worthless, did it? After all he had done for them...

Of course, it wasn't so much a logical thought to his now childlike mind as it was a confusing feeling of betrayal. He reclined in the chair at the weapons panel and put his feet up on the console. In his smaller body that was not as easy as it had once been, for his legs were too short to reach much further than the edge, leaving his heels to rest on the console. His arms were crossed sullenly and he was scowling. He was still determined to get even.

Then inspiration struck him. A pair of loosely hanging wires beneath the console gave him a devious plan, one that he was certain would show Luna and the others that they'd better think twice before messing with him again. Though much of what he remembered before his transformation was foggy, he still retained a lot of his technical knowledge. He hadn't lost any of what he'd learned in his thirty-some years of life when he regressed to childhood. He had simply lost the ability to process the information in an adult state of mind... and his current six-year-old mind had a decidedly mischievous use for that knowledge.

RedEye got on his hands and knees and crawled beneath the panel, ripping the dangling wires from their sockets. He probably should have shut the power off, but it wouldn't hurt him if he got shocked. One advantage of being a dark-dwelling Lunatac was that he had in his physiology the ability to project—and absorb—surges of electricity at a much higher level than most other beings. It was that that had once allowed him to power his Sidewinder. He took two of the wires and twisted them together, effectively shorting out one of the power channels. He then disconnected two others and replaced them in opposite sockets. Now if one of them tried to fire the left laser cannon, the right one would fire instead, and vice versa. He also crossed the alarm wires, so that if anyone triggered it, they would have to climb beneath the panel and undo his special wiring job to shut it off.

RedEye was so absorbed in his little task of revenge that he didn't hear the thump across the room that was Chilla knocking her box over. The baby Lunatac crawled out of her cardboard crib and made her way for the hallway, cooing in wide-eyed wonder.

It wasn't long before the other four Lunatacs returned to Skytomb. Their experience with the Mutants had left them in a worse mood than they had been in when they left. "I knew going to see those damned fleabag planet Plundarians would be a waste of time," TugMug ranted. "No self-respecting Lunatac should ask a *Mutant* for help anyway."

"And we're still no better off even after degrading ourselves in such a manner," Alluro added with a tone of disgust.

"We learned the Cave of Time isn't an option," Luna argued. "That's something."

"Yes, it gives us one less option than we had before," Alluro countered. He would have continued complaining if he hadn't at that moment stumbled as he stopped short to avoid stepping on a tiny blue creature crawling on the floor in front of him. "What the hells... Chilla?" Once he regained his balance, he bent down and picked up the tiny Lunatac.

TugMug frowned. "I thought you left her in a box or something."

"I left her with RedEye."

Luna's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Where is RedEye, anyway?"

"I don't know, but I have a feeling we better find out," TugMug told them, already bounding down the hallway as fast as he could, headed for the control room. Luna, Amok, and Alluro, still holding Chilla, followed in hot pursuit. They had just gotten to the doorway when TugMug let out a loud yell of fury. "What did you do?" he demanded of the boy. Immediately the others saw what had made him say that. A mess of wires, pieces, and paneling lay on the floor beneath a large section of the main console. RedEye was sitting on the panel, smirking devilishly.

"Rewiring," RedEye answered in a decidedly smart-assed tone.

Luna followed up TugMug's angry yell with one of her own. "Look at this mess! You had better start explaining yourself *this instant!*"

"And why was Chilla wandering around in the hallway when you were supposed to be looking after her?" Alluro added before RedEye had a chance to answer.

RedEye scowled back at the adult Lunatacs. "I don't have to do what you say. You're not my parents."

Luna waved her riding crop threateningly, while Amok growled beneath her. "Why you insolent little—"

"Oh, just SHUT UP, LUNA!" RedEye yelled back. He slammed his fist on the control panel, hitting the button that would trigger the rewired alarm. The emergency lights began to flash and a loud buzzer sounded all throughout Skytomb.

"That's it!" raged Luna. "I've had it with you! Amok, teach that little brat a lesson he will never forget!" Amok then charged in RedEye's direction. The boy tried to run away, knowing full well what Amok could do to him, but he wasn't fast enough. Amok got hold of his arm and yanked him backward hard, then delivered a hard punch to his gut that was enough to knock the wind out of him. RedEye, not nearly as strong or hardy in this young body, grunted from the force, but

that didn't affect Amok or his infuriated mistress. "That will teach you to defy me," Luna snarled viciously. "Again, Amok!"

Obediently her steed hit RedEye again. This time the boy yelled out in pain. Amok continued to strike the child in his grasp, not intending on stopping until Luna gave the order. The force of his massive fist cracked RedEye's ribs and left ugly red marks, which would change to lasting purple bruises, on his pale flesh. His pride made him hold from crying out as long as he could but before he knew it, he was screaming in pain anyway, begging for Luna and Amok to stop. When they didn't, his cries took on a tone of panicked terror, a fear that the vicious troll and her steed would not stop until they killed him.

"Luna, stop!" Alluro hollered. He set Chilla back in her box and ran over to Luna and Amok, while the infuriated TugMug tried in vain to shut off the rewired alarm, which was making him even more irritable than usual. Luna either didn't hear Alluro, or she ignored him, but either way, she didn't have Amok release RedEye. Amok continued to crush the boy in his viselike grip and hit him mercilessly. "LUNA! AMOK!" Alluro hollered at the top of his lungs. "STOP! YOU'LL KILL HIM!"

Luna and Amok both turned to Alluro. Amok stopped striking the boy, but did not release him, while Luna glared at the hypnotic Lunatac. "Give me one reason why I shouldn't," she seethed, even more angry at being interrupted from administering the punishment she felt RedEye so richly deserved.

"He's only a child, Luna. I think he learned his lesson. Anyway, what's the point of even bothering to find a remedy for his regression if you go and kill him?"

Luna indicated for Amok to drop RedEye. The beast threw RedEye's beaten and bruised form to the floor. He was alive, even still conscious, but with several broken ribs and in a great deal of pain. He gasped and wheezed on the floor where he fell, not even trying to stand for several moments. Luna gave him a disgusted look before she addressed Alluro's comment. "If I didn't know better, I'd say you were developing a conscience," she remarked to the other Lunatac, in a tone that indicated she did not mean it as a complement.

Alluro frowned at her snide tone. "It serves no purpose to kill those on our own team, Luna, even those who are not terribly useful at the moment. If you kill him, then we have no chance at getting him back to his old self, and he was a worthy Lunatac at one time. Isn't it *you* that is always such a big advocate of us working as a team anyhow?" he countered.

"Fine," Luna replied coldly. "I will let it go *this time*. I will *not* be so forgiving if it happens again," she said, speaking to RedEye as much as she was to Alluro. "Now get him out of my sight."

"RedEye," Alluro started, his tone less than friendly and full of authority and warning.

"I'm going," the injured boy Lunatac muttered, glaring at both of them as he struggled to stand. He was somewhat grateful that Alluro had eventually talked some sense into the tiny bitch that

called herself their leader, but he wasn't going to say as much. At that moment, he hated all of them anyway.

"And take Chilla with you," TugMug snarled, roughly shoving the now-crying baby into his arms. "The control room is no place for a couple of worthless whelps."

RedEye fought back a sob, the sudden pressure of the baby Lunatac in his arms putting a strain on his injured body. He was determined not to let them see him cry again though, for the humiliation of what Amok did to him was bad enough. Once he was out in the hallway, he went straight for the nearest lift. He didn't take it to his quarters like they might have expected, however.

Instead he took it to the vehicle landing bay. Once there he climbed into Chilla's Ice Runner and started it up. After securing Chilla on the seat beside him, he opened the doors. Moments later, the Ice Runner sped off into the growing darkness outside. The two children had done what most would have done in such a situation. They had run away.

Stationed at the Braille Board in the Tower of Omens, a frown of puzzlement crossed Lynx-O's wise face. "That is most peculiar," he murmured with a shake of his head.

"What is it, Lynx-O?" asked Pumyra. She and Bengali, also in the Tower's control room, joined his side. The lynx was officially on watch, but they had all finished dinner not long ago and were keeping him company for a while. They had no other pressing business, and it was Snarfer's turn to do the dishes that night.

"A Lunatac craft just emerged from DarkSide."

"Rrrowl, we'd better prepare for trouble then," Bengali said, already heading for one of the weapons stations.

"No, wait, I don't think it means to attack," Lynx-O said.

"Since when do Lunatacs not attack?" Pumyra asked. "Shouldn't we be on the defensive just in case?"

"I do not believe we will need to be," Lynx-O insisted. "Let me bring it up on the monitor for you." He keyed in a sequence and a grid appeared on their viewscreen, with a blue-colored blip flying quickly, but in an inconsistent pattern, away from the direction of DarkSide.

Out of habit, Pumyra ran the preliminary scans on the ship and immediately it registered as the Ice Runner. "That's the Ice Runner, Lynx-O... It can't fit more than two Lunatacs at most, but if Chilla's on her way here it could mean we're in for some trouble."

"I don't remember Chilla ever flying that badly though," Bengali noted with a frown.
"Whoever's driving it could use some piloting lessons."

"This is getting even stranger, Thundercats," Lynx-O said. "The Braille Board tells me that the pilot is small... it's not Chilla."

"Luna?" Pumyra asked incredulously.

"I don't know. But the craft is not flying safely, it's going far too fast and it appears that the pilot is losing control of it. In fact, I think it may—"

Before Lynx-O could finish, the blip on the monitors showed an erratic maneuver and then froze. It started blinking brightly. All three gasped in surprise. A blink like that only meant one thing.

"It crashed," Pumyra noted quietly. They were silent for a moment before they met each other's eyes. "I guess we should see if there were any injuries... dropping from their altitude it's pretty likely."

"Wait a second," Bengali interrupted. "That was a Lunatac ship. Why should we help them? They would just as soon kill us."

"We're Thundercats, Bengali," Lynx-O argued. "We are sworn to help all in need, even those who may not deserve our help. If we knowingly ignored someone in distress and they were to die, that death would be on our conscience."

Pumyra nodded. "He's right. I don't like the idea of helping them either, but it is the right thing to do. Come on, let's go."

Bengali sighed and paged Snarfer to come to the control room, since they would need someone to watch the place while they were out. "Yeah, you're right... I hate it, but you're right."

A minute or so later Snarfer joined them in the control room. Lynx-O quickly filled him in on the situation and asked him to keep an eye on things, which naturally the helpful snarf said he would do. He shared Bengali's concern about going to the enemy's aid, but he understood why they did it. Lynx-O then turned the Braille Board control station over to Snarfer, and once that was taken care of the three Thundercats hurried to the Thunderstrike. In a flash they took off, bound for the crash site.

A distressed cry from the miraculously unharmed (save for a few minor scrapes and cuts) baby Chilla next to him was the first thing RedEye heard when he gained consciousness. He blinked and tried to focus on his surroundings. It was now well after sunset on Third Earth and it was dark all around where they had crashed, but to his specially adapted eyes it might as well have been daylight. He sat up and felt a dull throb in his chest. It wasn't an injury from the crash, but

the cracked rib Amok had given him earlier at Luna's command. The crash itself had left him with barely a scratch.

Looking around he saw that although he and Chilla were all right, the Ice Runner was pretty much destroyed. While as an adult RedEye had been a good pilot, as a child it was more than he could handle. His shorter stature lacked the ability to comfortably reach all the controls and read the instrument panels at the same time, and his coordination was not as finely developed as it had once been. He made it over Fire Rock Mountain with some effort, but it had tired him and since he had not eaten anything in hours but that large lollipop earlier, his body was tired and he couldn't concentrate too well. An unexpected air current knocked the Ice Runner off balance, and he hadn't been able to recover. The crash was the result. As he surveyed the damage his first thought was "Chilla's gonna kill me," but then he remembered that Chilla—or more accurately, the baby that was once the woman he called Chilla—was right here. "You okay Chilla?" he asked, then let out a stupid laugh. As if she could even answer him. He reached for Chilla, whose cries quieted somewhat at the touch. A quick once-over confirmed to him that she was unharmed.

"We gotta get out of here Chilla," he said, carefully extracting himself from the twisted mass of metal and broken glass around him. "Luna was already mad enough, now she's really gonna want to kill us for this." It wasn't so much a childish exaggeration as a genuine fear—and likely a well-founded one, given how she'd overreacted to what he did to the control room. RedEye first crawled out, then reached for Chilla and pulled her out too. He took a few steps back to see how bad the damage was and winced. Yes, he'd better be miles away before Luna found that, or he'd be dead, no question.

Moments later he heard the sound of a craft approaching. He looked up and recognized it as the Thunderstrike. The bright lights of the ship illuminated the immediate area and hurt his eyes for a moment. He clutched Chilla, more out of fear than any need for protection. *No, not the Thundercats... not now...* His first instinct was to break into a run, but he was already so tired and sore that he didn't think he could. Besides, where would he go? The land around him was flat plain, no trees or anywhere to hide. He swallowed hard and backed himself up against the crashed Ice Runner. He set Chilla down beside him and took a defensive stance as he watched as Pumyra, Bengali, and Lynx-O step out of the Thundercat ship and head toward him. "Go away! Leave me alone!" he shouted to them.

"What in the name of Jaga?" asked Bengali, looking from Pumyra to Lynx-O in disbelief.

"He's a boy... a Lunatac boy," Pumyra noted with surprise. She then noticed the tiny blue baby huddling next to RedEye's legs. "And a baby too," she added before addressing the two children. "Are you all right?"

"I said go away Thundercats," young RedEye warned in a tone that sounded more panicked than threatening.

"Hold back," Lynx-O instructed his fellow Thundercats. "If he's frightened we must not startle him further."

"I'm not afraid of you!" RedEye protested. "Just leave me alone. I don't like cats! If you come any closer I'll—"

"You'll what?" challenged an unimpressed Bengali. He wasn't thrilled about his 'Lunatac rescue mission' to begin with, and he did not want to put up with a stubborn brat of their kind. Especially when they had gone out of their way to help him.

Pumyra took a few non-threatening steps toward him. "We don't want to hurt you, we came to see if you were hurt. We saw the crash on our scanners and thought we might be able to help. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine."

"It looks like you have some bruises and cuts."

"Had them already," RedEye answered grouchily.

Lynx-O's ears twitched as he picked up the tone in his voice. "Before the crash?"

"Yeah, so what?"

"Did someone do this to you?" she questioned gently. It bothered her deeply that someone would be vicious enough to hit a boy of his young age hard enough to inflict wounds like his.

RedEye shifted uncomfortably and glared at her. "I said I was fine so go away. I don't want your help. I can take care of myself."

"And the baby with you?" Lynx-O inquired patiently. Pumyra took another step forward and reached for Chilla, wanting to get a better look at the child and see if she was all right, especially after what RedEye had said.

"Hey! Leave her alone!" RedEye exclaimed, and shoved Pumyra out of the way. "Don't touch her! GO AWAY!"

Bengali growled with annoyance. "Why don't we? Like he said, they're not hurt, and he doesn't want us here. Let his parents come and deal with him."

"Bengali!" Pumyra turned and gave him a sharp look of disapproval, before returning her attention to the young Lunatacs in front of her. "Where are your parents? We could contact them. And please, may I look at her?" she asked, gesturing to Chilla. "I promise I will not hurt her. I'm a healer, and I just want to make sure she isn't hurt. Is she your sister?" It was a lot of questions, but she hoped he would answer at least one of them.

RedEye shook his head. "She's not my sister. And we don't have parents."

"Then how did you get here?" Lynx-O questioned. "There are very few Lunatacs on this planet as far as I know. Did they bring you here?"

"Did they do this to you?" Pumyra added, watching RedEye carefully for an answer.

RedEye didn't stop Pumyra from taking Chilla this time, but sullenly stomped a few steps away and turned his back. "I don't have to answer you."

"No, you don't," Lynx-O agreed. "But we can help you if you let us. Where do you live? We can take you back to your home."

"Don't have one," was RedEye's response.

Pumyra, now holding the tiny Chilla in her arms, was relieved to see that the child was indeed all right. She had a couple of scrapes, probably from the crash, but didn't look like she'd broken any bones or lost any blood. She could use a diaper change, she realized with a wrinkle of her nose, but other than that she appeared to be fine. She was also an adorable child too, she realized. It made her mad to think that whatever parents she might have didn't appreciate such a gift. Pumyra herself had always liked cubs. She hoped to have several of her own someday.

Tearing her eyes away from the tiny Lunatac in her arms for a moment she glanced at the wreck from which the two children had emerged and shook her head. It astonished her that they were all right given the damage to the craft. Then she took a second look at the twisted pile of metal. She recognized that craft. It was the Ice Runner. So they were with the Lunatacs. She wondered if they were the ones who had given the boy those ugly bruises.

A horrible thought then struck her. *I hope Skytomb wasn't their home...* She imagined it would be sheer hell to grow up in such a place and among such vicious beings. To her knowledge none of the Lunatacs had mates or children, but Third Earth was a big planet and it was possible that they had missed an arrival of others of their kind, especially if it was in Dark Side. She also wondered if they had been in Skytomb, why they were no longer there. Had they been thrown out, or did they run away? She supposed it didn't matter, for she wasn't about to make them go back if it was indeed where they'd come from.

"Please let us take you back to the Tower of Omens," Pumyra urged the young RedEye. "I promise we won't harm you or your sis... I mean, the baby—" Pumyra then realized she did not know either child's name "—and it will be a warm and safe place. No one will bother you. You can stay as long as you want, and leave whenever you want."

"Pumyra!" Bengali exclaimed. The tiger Thundercat could not believe she'd just offered a child of an enemy race a free license to live in their home, without even discussing it with him or Lynx-O first. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"They need somewhere to stay, Bengali," she replied heatedly, not liking the tone in his voice. She didn't understand why he was so unwilling to help a couple of innocent kids. Surely they couldn't be that much trouble.

Lynx-O agreed with Pumyra. "Yes, the wilds of Third Earth are no place for children with no home. You and the baby are welcome to stay with us," he told RedEye. Bengali frowned with disapproval, but did not argue further.

RedEye sighed and nodded. He didn't like the idea of staying with Thundercats, but he was tired and hungry and he still hurt. Besides, it wasn't like he had anywhere else he could go. He'd just leave in the morning. "Okay, but just for now," he agreed reluctantly.

Pumyra smiled and carried baby Chilla to the Thunderstrike, and motioned for RedEye to follow. "Come on, then. You can ride in the center section with Lynx-O and your friend here," she said, handing him the baby after he climbed in. "Bengali and I will ride in the other pods, and we'll see you back there." After Lynx-O joined RedEye in the Thunderstrike she closed the door.

On her way back to her pod, Pumyra felt a tap on her shoulder. When she turned around she saw a rather angry-looking Bengali. "I hope you know what you're doing, because I think you just let us in for a whole damned world of trouble," he growled, then turned and climbed into his pod without waiting for a reply.

"Bengali, listen to—" The tiger ignored her and slammed the door of his pod shut before she could answer. "—me," she finished with a sigh. She then climbed in her own pod and prepared for takeoff, hoping that he was wrong.

Back in Skytomb, Alluro paced on the floor of his lab, looking over the notes for the youth water again. He still had no idea how they might be able to reverse its effects, and the stress of it—not to mention Luna's complaining—was starting to get to him. Shortly after the fiasco in the control room he had gone back to his lab in the hopes that he might see something he didn't before. He had hoped that some time away might have cleared his mind enough to allow something he might not have considered earlier to come to him, and it was worth a try. Besides, his lab was a lot quieter than anywhere Luna was, and that in and of itself was reason enough to be there. But unfortunately he had no such luck as far as thinking of a reversal process for the de-aging.

After rereading the diagram for the hundredth time, Alluro threw the paper onto the floor. "Forget it, I can't even concentrate on this," he muttered. Now it seemed that his lab was *too* quiet, and that made it almost as difficult for him to think as too much noise. He glanced over to the corner where the box that held baby Chilla had been earlier and frowned. Where was she, anyway? Last he'd seen, RedEye had carried her off somewhere. But that was some time ago now, he realized, and both RedEye and Chilla had been unusually quiet since the incident downstairs. *I'd better find them*, he decided. He figured that RedEye had probably returned to his quarters after Luna's beating and had simply taken Chilla with him. Normally he would have let RedEye be but he didn't trust the boy Lunatac to not do something—inadvertently or otherwise—that might bring harm to the baby Chilla.

He made his way to RedEye's quarters and knocked on the door. "RedEye? Are you in there?" he inquired.

There was no reply.

Alluro narrowed his eyes. If RedEye was anywhere, it would be here, and he was in no mood for any childish games. "RedEye," he repeated, a little louder this time.

Still no answer.

"All right, fine," Alluro grumbled, and opened the door himself. It wasn't locked, much to his surprise. He would have figured the boy would try and keep Luna and Amok out after the beating he'd gotten at their hands. When he walked in he realized quickly why RedEye didn't answer—because he wasn't there. Little Chilla was nowhere to be seen either.

Where is she, then? Alluro wondered with a mild feeling of rising panic. He knew all too well what a dangerous place Skytomb could be for a child so young, he had helped design it after all. The thought that she might have been left unsupervised to crawl onto the lower decks with the dungeons and engines...

Immediately Alluro turned from the doorway and ran for the control room. He saw that Luna, Amok, and TugMug were still in there as he pushed past them to get to the scanner panel. Immediately he started a command that would locate every life form in the fortress that weighed over five pounds. "Where are Chilla and RedEye?" Alluro demanded of the others as he waited for the program to respond.

"Who cares?" TugMug replied with a shrug. "As long as they're out of my way, that's all I care about."

Alluro turned and narrowed his eyes at the high gravity Lunatac. "I can't find them. I want to know where they are, and now."

"RedEye's probably cowering in his room, the little brat," Luna said with a hint of contempt still in her voice. "Chilla's probably still with him, TugMug gave her to him."

Alluro watched the screen impatiently, still seeing the "searching..." message flash on the screen. "Why in the hells is this thing so slow?" he snarled irritably.

"You can thank RedEye for that," TugMug informed him. "I just got the power working again on that grid about fifteen minutes ago, but I still have about half of the cells off, since we're still trying to fix that wiring mess over on the weapons panel."

Luna gave Alluro a curious look. "Why do you care so much anyhow? He'll turn up. It's not like he has anywhere else to go."

"What you don't seem to realize, Luna, is that at her age, Chilla needs full time attention. We can't simply leave her to be dealt with 'later' when she becomes inconvenient. Gods only knows what she could get into if she got onto the lower decks."

"She'll turn up," Luna said nonchalantly. "Besides, if she can't care for herself it's her own fault. What *you* seem to forget is that she is not a baby, Alluro, but an adult regressed to a child's body. I will not waste my time watching someone who should be able to take care of herself."

"And whose fault is it that she became so young to begin with?" Alluro snapped. "Someone who had another 'brilliant' scheme that had to drag the rest of us down with her. Someone who has these sort of ridiculous schemes far too often," he said contemptuously to the Lunatac leader.

Luna narrowed her eyes. "Don't you dare take that tone with me, Alluro!" Amok echoed her statement with a growl.

Alluro was about to tell Luna what she could do with her threat when the computer beeped and gave the scanner readout. There were only four life forms listed in Skytomb within the weight range he indicated, and all four of them were in the control room: him, Luna, Amok, and TugMug. "They're not here," he said, shocked.

"What do you mean, they're not here?" Luna demanded.

"Just what I said, read it yourself," Alluro told her arrogantly, pointing to the screen. "There are only four of us listed here, and that means either they're dead or they left. Nice job, my great leader, you drove RedEye right out of Skytomb and he took Chilla with him," he said, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

Amok growled at Alluro for the tone he was taking with his mistress, but in the interests of getting to the bottom of the matter, Luna stopped him from taking it further. "How could they have left? It hasn't been that long, just do a scan of the area."

"We've got those scanners operational, I'll take a look and see if they're anywhere close," TugMug volunteered.

Acting on a hunch, Alluro ran a check through the computer logs and found out that the vehicle bay doors had been opened more recently than when they returned from Castle Plundarr. He called up a view of the bay itself and immediately saw the Ice Runner is missing. "Don't bother, you won't find them. He took the Ice Runner. It's gone."

"What?" TugMug, Luna, and Amok echoed in unison. Luna shook her head. "This is ridiculous, first that brat tears apart our control room and now he runs off with one of our war vehicles? If I get my hands on him I'll tear him to pieces!"

"You mean Amok will tear him to pieces," TugMug corrected her with a laugh.

"Grrr, tear to pieces," agreed Luna's steed.

Luna frowned. "This isn't funny, TugMug. He's been nothing but trouble since this whole mess started!"

"And who's fault is that, I wonder," Alluro commented snidely.

Luna whirled around and glared at him. "Shut up."

Alluro punched a few more keys on the pad and read the readout. Next he reached up on a shelf next to the console and picked up a hand-held portable scanner, programmed in the settings, and then he started for the door, pausing only to give Luna a disgusted look. "I don't have time to deal with your nonsense now, Luna. I'll be back later."

"And where do you think you're going?" she demanded.

"I'm going to find Chilla and RedEye." He then left without waiting for an answer. He went down to the landing bay and took one of the jet packs out. He figured that using that would make it easier to maneuver through the more difficult terrain of the area and would give him a better chance at finding the Ice Runner. He had its signaling codes programmed into his hand scanner, so he figured he'd be able to track it fairly easily. He then strapped the pack on his back, turned on the power, and left Skytomb.

Snarfer greeted the party that returned to the Tower of Omens with complete surprise. He had not expected them to return with pint-sized Lunatacs, and was doubly surprised that they weren't being taken against their will. "Snarfer snarfer... what's going on?" he asked them.

"These children need a home for the time being, Snarfer," Lynx-O told him. "We found them at the crash site. They have nowhere to go so we took them in."

"I still say it's a mistake," Bengali said quietly.

RedEye scowled at the tiger. "Hey, I didn't even *ask* for your help."

"It's all right," Pumyra assured the boy, shooting Bengali a dirty look. "You're welcome here. You look tired," she said quietly. "Would you like to get cleaned up and get some rest? Or maybe something to eat?"

"I could get some of Uncle Snarf's pasta, snarfer snarfer. We still have plenty in the fridge."

"That sounds great, Snarfer," Pumyra agreed. "I have to take this little one and change her diaper... she doesn't look too comfortable, and I think she'll sleep better if I get her in some soft bedding," she said, cradling the baby Chilla closer to herself. The tiny Lunatac yawned and curled up against her, either not realizing that she was in "enemy" hands or too tired to care.

"Okay, c'mon, uh, what was your name, did you say?" Snarfer asked RedEye.

RedEye froze. He had picked up on the fact that the Thundercats didn't know who he was and that was why they were helping him. He worried that if they now learned otherwise, especially

Bengali, who didn't like him anyway, that they'd turn on him. He couldn't fight them, they were too big, too powerful. "Red," he told them. "My name's Red."

"Snaaaarfer, okay Red, let's go get something to eat!" the snarf said happily. He led the boy Lunatac out of the room, and Pumyra carried the little Chilla to the bathroom.

Bengali watched them go and shook his head. Lynx-O could sense his mood and motioned for him to come over. "Why are you so against helping them, Bengali?"

"Because they're Lunatacs. Because I don't trust them. How do we know this wasn't a setup? That it's not some sick trick of Luna's to use children to play on our sympathies as a way to get a spy in our base? You know how underhanded they are!"

Lynx-O nodded thoughtfully. "I wouldn't put it past them to do something like that either... but I also could not in good conscience leave those children alone on the chance that they truly did need our help. It's in our Code of Thundera to help those in need, no matter who they may be."

"I know," Bengali grumbled. "I'm not heartless, Lynx-O. I don't want to see children hurt any more than you do. But I also won't trust an enemy child blindly. That's plain foolish. What we should have done is find out where they came from and take them there. They must have parents, especially that frozen Lunatac baby. She can't be over two galacto years old, if she's even that."

"Not exactly an ideal age for a spy, either," Lynx-O remarked pointedly.

Bengali narrowed his eyes. "Look, I know why you brought them here, I even understand it. But don't expect me to like it." He glanced at the monitor, then turned and headed for the hallway. "If I'm not needed here, I'll be in my quarters. Good night, Lynx-O." The tiger then departed the control room. Lynx-O simply shook his head, sighed. Bengali would always be Bengali, he thought ruefully as he took over monitoring the braille board. It was shaping up to be a long night.

Upstairs in one of the washrooms, Pumyra had just finished giving little Chilla a quick bath. The diaper had not been as bad as she thought, but it had needed a change. At first she had made the mistake of using warm water on the child, but the shriek she let out at the touch of it reminded her that the ice Lunatac needed colder water. It felt strange to be bathing her in water that was closer to a temperature ideal for swimming in on a hot day as opposed to bath water, but she seemed to like it. Especially when she splashed Pumyra with a faceful of water—that made her start giggling.

"Real cute," she muttered, almost laughing herself. "I guess you Lunatacs are troublemakers from day one, huh?" she said aloud to the child with a smirk. Chilla only answered her with some gurgles and babbles. Chuckling to herself, Pumyra took a dab of shampoo and rubbed it into Chilla's hair. As she massaged it in she took a long look at the baby's cute features. There was something strangely familiar about them. She had of course wondered for a brief moment if the child was Chilla's—being that she was the only other Lunatac of that kind on the planet that she knew of—but she dismissed that thought quickly. She couldn't imagine the same woman

who had mercilessly iced the Thunderkittens with intent to kill on more than one occasion having any sort of maternal instinct of her own whatsoever.

A drop of shampoo bubbles dribbled into the baby Chilla's eyes, causing a sting that immediately made her start crying. Pumyra quickly grabbed a towel and dabbed it out. She tried to hush her up by talking gently to her, but that didn't work until a minute or so later. When her sobs softened to sniffles, Pumyra met her eyes closely and smiled. "There you go... is that better?" she asked gently.

Little Chilla just sniffed again and blinked back at her. Her wide green eyes seemed to have a strange sense of awareness in them that Pumyra couldn't quite place. It was almost as if she were looking at her and not understanding or knowing what to make of it. The Thundercat found it spooky. "I wonder who your parents are," she said softly. Chilla just stared back at her blankly. Pumyra shook her head and stood up again, intent on finishing the bath and getting her into a suitable bed. "I wonder."

Alluro fought back a yawn. He didn't have a timekeeping device on him, but he knew it was late. He felt like he had been out scanning the area in the jet pack for ages. He knew when he selected it that it wasn't the fastest mode of transportation around but with the Ice Runner out it was the most versatile. He wondered where the Ice Runner was, anyway. He could still pick up its signal, but it was stationary. That meant that wherever RedEye had taken it, he had parked it. It had remained in the same place for some time now though, and he wasn't sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

The night was darker than most, too. The moon cast little light over the darkened landscape and he only had a hand-held search light to aid him. By his estimation he was getting nearer to the Ice Runner now. He hoped he got there soon and found them, so he could go back and get some sleep. His own youth-restored body may have had more stamina than it used to, but there were still limits, ones which he was rapidly approaching. "I could kill Luna for this mess," he muttered with disgust. It was actually a statement he made quite often, but he never followed it through. The idea of being turned into putty by Amok's massive fists was quite effective at quelling the violent urges he felt for his leader.

"RedEye!" he shouted, hoping that the boy was within hearing distance. "Chilla!"

He went along for several more minutes, searching with the light and heading for the Ice Runner, when suddenly his scanner started blinking. He swooped lower to the ground, knowing that light meant that he was within visual distance of the craft. "Chilla! RedEye!" he called again. He ran the search light slowly along the ground below. A sudden bright flash that looked like metal reflecting the beam back at him caught his eye. Quickly he focused his light on it. His heart sank and his stomach turned at what he saw.

It was the Ice Runner, and it was completely destroyed. His first thought was that someone shot them down. Thundercats, or perhaps even the Mutants getting a little trigger-happy? Or had it

been an accident? Alluro slowly cut the power on the jet pack so he could land next to the wreck and take a closer look. *Expect the worst*, he told himself, looking at the twisted mass of metal in front of him.

Alluro landed and walked to the front of the craft. He braced himself and flashed his light over what he could see of the interior. He was relieved to see no blood and no bodies... but at the same time puzzled. "If they aren't here, where are they?" he wondered aloud.

He looked around the immediate area. It was flat plain, mostly grass and weeds, but no trees or nearby mountains or caves in which they could be hiding. He walked around, trying to figure out where they might have gone from here, when he saw vehicle tracks in the grass. Large tracks. *Someone took them. They were here but someone took them.* The thought disturbed him greatly. He figured it probably wasn't the mutants. They wouldn't have bothered with children and if they had picked them up for some reason, they would have contacted Skytomb about them, since they were aware of their dilemma.

That left only one other group on the planet with a vehicle that size. "Thundercats," Alluro said contemptuously. "Damned cats always have to interfere. Why can't they just for once let us be?" He kicked at the grass in frustration. He hated the idea that his fellow Lunatacs, especially baby Chilla, might be trapped in one of their fortresses, and now he had to think of a way to get them back as well. He debated calling Luna about it, but nixed the idea on second thought. What would Luna or TugMug do, other than complain or tell him to just forget about them anyway—which was something he knew he could not do. He was evil, but he did care what happened to the other Lunatacs, especially when it came to Chilla. She had always been his friend, and at times he even thought....

Alluro snapped out of his thoughts and turned his jet pack back on. He wasn't helping them any by standing around brooding and wasting time. What he had to focus on now was figuring out just where the Thundercats had taken them, and how he would go about getting them back. In the darkness it was hard to determine from the tracks exactly which vehicle had been there, though he guessed it was either the Feliner or the Thunderstrike given that the tracks were localized, as though something had simply landed and taken off. That didn't help him any in determining if he should investigate the Tower of Omens or Cat's Lair, however. Of course, the thought of going to either on his own was intimidating enough, even for one as confident as he usually was.

"I might as well pick one," he said with a shrug. He considered his location, and decided to try the Tower of Omens first. It was closer, and maybe he would get lucky. He took a deep breath, flipped the switch on the jet pack to full power, and took off into the night once more.

Lynx-O's ears perked up as the braille board translated some information to him from the Tower of Omens' long-range scanner system. It indicated the presence of some small air vehicle in the same general area as the crashed Ice Runner, now heading in the direction of the Tower of Omens. "Strange," he murmured. He called Pumyra on the intercom to come to the control room.

He could have called Bengali, but given his mood Lynx-O decided he would let him be until he cooled off unless it turned out that he was urgently needed.

Within a minute Pumyra had joined him in the control room. "What's up, Lynx-O?"

"I want you to look at something. I'll bring it up on the screen." He typed in a sequence and the visual scan of whatever was heading for the Tower of Omens appeared. "It was at the site where the Ice Runner crashed just a few minutes ago. I think it might be someone looking for those Lunatac children."

Pumyra frowned. "Is it a Lunatac ship?"

"It's so small I don't know if I would call it a ship, and I'm not getting any specific information that could tell me that. It's possible that it's one of them on those jet packs I've seen them use, I suppose," Lynx-O said thoughtfully. "What about the children, Pumyra, how are they?"

"The little girl is asleep. I gave her a bath and set her on some clean blankets in one of the spare snarf-beds we have. It works pretty well as a crib, actually. No sooner had I set her down and she was out like a light," she told him, her face lighting up a little as she described it. Lynx-O could tell from the tone in her voice that she was getting somewhat attached to the Lunatac child.

"And the boy?"

"He's also asleep. Snarfer fed him dinner and let him sleep in one of the guest rooms. He doesn't seem to trust us very much."

"He is a Lunatac, Pumyra. Our people have been at odds with theirs for many generations. He has probably been taught from birth to fear our kind."

"And Bengali didn't help matters any, either," Pumyra remarked sharply. "I could have smacked him for the way he was acting."

Lynx-O smiled faintly. "You know how he can be, Pumyra. He's good at heart, he will come around eventually." The older Thundercat then returned his attention to the braille board. "But what do you think we should do about the craft heading for us now?"

Pumyra's face darkened slightly. "If it's someone looking for those kids, I think we should go and find out why."

"I agree. Do you think we should go together?"

"I don't know if that's necessary," Pumyra replied, studying the screen. "If it's only one of them, then one of us confronting him or her should be enough. You can monitor from here in case anything does happen. I'll take the ThunderClaw."

"Very well. Don't hesitate to call if you need help though. You and I both know how treacherous Lunatacs can be."

"Will do, Lynx-O!" Pumyra then dashed from the room, grabbed her sling, and headed to the ThunderClaw. She started up the engines and turned on the lights, then sped out of the base of the Tower in the direction of the incoming visitor.

Alluro was just able to make out the night lighting of the Tower of Omens in the distance when a shot from the oncoming direction flew above him. It was well above his head, which meant that either the one firing upon him was a very lousy shot, or it was only meant as a warning. He slowed down nonetheless, and just as he did the ThunderClaw pulled up in front of him. "Stop right there, Lunatac!" warned the driver.

The hypnotic Lunatac recognized her as the one called Pumyra. "Firing on an innocent traveler? Isn't that against your silly little Code of Thundera?" Alluro retorted to her snidely. "Besides, I'm not here to cause you any trouble... I'm merely looking for someone, so kindly let me pass."

"Who are you looking for?" Pumyra asked, her eyes narrowing suspiciously. "And for that matter, who are you?"

Alluro frowned, but then realized that Pumyra must not recognize him after his own age regression. *Good gods, did I really look that old that I don't even look like the same Lunatac?* The thought depressed him a bit. "You don't know who I am," he said, more statement than question.

Pumyra shook her head. "I thought there were only six Lunatacs on this planet... well until today, anyway."

Something in her tone made him suspect that he was not the first "unfamiliar" Lunatac to cross her path today. So his suspicions about the Thundercats taking RedEye and Chilla had been right. It relieved and distressed him at the same time. He knew that the children would be physically safe and likely cared for among them, but he also hated the idea of them being in their nauseatingly self-righteous hands. If she had them, then he now had to convince her to give them back... which, he realized, might take a bit of effort. He lowered his jet pack to the ground and indicated for her to do the same with her vehicle. It was too difficult to carry on a conversation with engines roaring around them, and besides, being on the ground would make it easier for him to hypnotize her if he had to. When Pumyra also landed, he took a few steps closer. "So you have seen the children then," he said.

"Yes." Pumyra nodded. "I saw Lunatac children earlier today."

"Where are they?"

Pumyra inhaled sharply and gave him a dark, suspicious look. "And why should I tell you?"

"Because they're not your concern, Thundercat," Alluro replied, his own voice taking on an irritated edge.

"That's where you're wrong," she argued. "Any child with bruises like the ones Red had is my concern. He told me that they weren't from the crash, either. I'm not going to help put him back with anyone who would do such a thing."

Alluro closed his eyes and looked down for a moment. "Damn Luna," he muttered under his breath. That incident still made him angry. He may not have been the most sensitive or caring individual around but he still thought her actions were way out of line. Then again, Luna usually was. Alluro raised his eyes to meet her gaze once more. "I had nothing to do with that."

Pumyra blinked at the mention of Luna. "Luna did that?"

"With more than a little help from Amok, but yes," he replied. "Don't tell me that surprises you."

"No, it doesn't. But what does surprise me is to find some stranger here looking for these equally strange kids that neither I nor any of the other Thundercats have seen before. So please tell me, why are you looking for them?"

"I merely want to bring them home." He felt strange using that word in relation to a war fortress like Skytomb, but it was the only home that the Lunatacs had on Third Earth.

"Home? Are they your children?" she asked, puzzled.

Alluro was surprised that she drew that conclusion, but if it worked in his favor, he wasn't going to argue it. "Yes," he told her.

"Oh really," Pumyra challenged, her voice taking on an icy tone. "That's funny, because the boy told me that he and the baby weren't related."

"The girl is mine," Alluro covered quickly. And hells, it was the truth on some level... he was the only one of the Lunatacs who had taken any sort of care of Chilla since her youth regression. He certainly didn't trust any of the others to do it. He supposed that did mean he was acting *like* her father in some strange way. "The boy is an orphan," he explained further, hoping it would clear the Thundercat's suspicions.

"She doesn't look much like you. The baby I mean." Pumyra watched his response carefully.

Alluro smiled confidently. "No, she looks like her mother." That wasn't a complete lie either. Chilla had mentioned bearing a great resemblance to her mother on more than one occasion.

Pumyra considered his words for a moment, then relaxed a little. "All right, I believe you. But I need to ask you something, Lunatac, before I take you to your daughter and her friend... like I said earlier, until today we thought the only Lunatacs on Third Earth were the six in Skytomb. So who are you and those children and where are you from?"

"Keeping tabs on your enemies?" Alluro replied, raising an eyebrow.

"Letting me know if my people and I have to watch our backs because there are even more of you is the least you can do for me after I convinced the others to take in your children and keep them out of harm's way."

"Fine. Myself and a few others, including the children, came in a ship that landed in Dark Side about two months ago. The Lunatacs you know agreed to let us stay in their fortress. That's how Luna got her hands on the boy." He had forgotten what Pumyra said he called himself to her, so he was careful not to use a name as he fabricated his tale.

"I hope you and your mate don't let her do those things to your child."

"I have no mate. Just the baby."

"Her mother—" Pumyra started.

"Her mother is gone," Alluro said, cutting her off. He didn't want to waste any more time storytelling, especially with a depressing subject such as that.

"Oh, I'm sorry, um...." Pumyra's voice trailed off in apology. She had mistaken his abruptness for an emotional reaction. "...you know, you never told me your name," she said quietly.

Alluro thought quickly. "Roren." Again, his response wasn't a complete lie. He had learned early on that the most believable lies were the ones somewhat based in truth. The name he gave Pumyra was the birth name given to him by his parents. "Alluro" was a warrior discipline name given to him by his people after he developed his powers. He had decided he liked the sound of that better, so he kept it. No one had referred to him as his birth name since... well since he looked like he did now the first time around, he realized with mild amusement.

"All right Roren, let's go get your daughter and her friend... it's getting late and I imagine you probably want to take her home," Pumyra said, heading back toward the ThunderClaw. "I'll take you to the Tower of Omens. We've got the kids there. But I warn you, Lunatac, we're being monitored as we speak by my allies and if you try anything treacherous, you'll not only be blasted out of the air, but you can kiss the idea of ever seeing those children again goodbye."

Alluro narrowed his eyes a slight bit, but started his jet pack anyway. "Lead the way."

Bengali made his way down to the control room of the Tower of Omens only a few minutes after Pumyra left. He had cooled down a little after the disagreement earlier and was hoping to catch Pumyra so he could talk to her. While he still hated the idea of the young Lunatacs being in the Tower of Omens, he also hated having Pumyra mad at him. As he entered he saw Lynx-O closely monitoring something on the braille board, which was unusual for this time of night. "Is everything all right, Lynx-O? What's going on?"

"There's no direct trouble, but there could be," the somewhat distracted lynx replied.

"What do you mean? And where's Pumyra?"

"Confronting it," Lynx-O answered, his ears twitching slightly.

Bengali growled and joined Lynx-O at the braille board. "Confronting? What happened? Is she all right? Does she need help?"

"Please stay calm, Bengali. Pumyra is fine. She is out in ThunderClaw, which I am monitoring from here. A small craft of some sort was spotted near where the Lunatac children were found, and though we couldn't positively identify it, we suspect that it may be another one of the Lunatacs searching for them. Then shortly after it appeared it started heading directly for us here at the Tower of Omens. Pumyra wanted to go out and find out what it was on her own."

"Rrrrowl and you let her just go by herself? What if it's an ambush? She could need our help!"

Lynx-O tapped a few more buttons on the panel and brought the scan up on the monitor for Bengali. "She promised she would send a distress signal at even the slightest hint of trouble. Don't worry, I can fire at the other vehicle from here if need be, it's well within range. Pumyra won't get herself into trouble out there, I'm sure of it."

"I hope so," Bengali said with a doubtful shake of his head. "But I don't like it." Suddenly the dots on the monitor that represented the ThunderClaw and the other vehicle, which had been previously stationary, started to move at the same time. Both seemed to have the same destination as well—a direct course for the Tower of Omens. "Is she bringing whoever that is back here? Or is it chasing her?"

"No," Lynx-O confirmed. "The speeds are too low to indicate a chase. It looks like your first guess was right, that she is leading our visitor here."

"Maybe it wasn't a Lunatac after all," theorized Bengali.

"Perhaps not. We'll soon see. They should be landing shortly. Let's go and greet them." The two Thundercats then hurried down the halls, both holding their weapons in case there turned out to be trouble, and went to the landing bay. When they walked in they saw Pumyra parking the ThunderClaw, with Alluro on his jet pack right behind her. Both Lynx-O and Bengali instinctively reached for their weapons when they saw the Lunatac with her.

Bengali narrowed his eyes at Alluro. "Pumyra! Are you all right? Who is that?"

"It's all right, guys... This is Roren. He's a Lunatac that's new to this planet. Don't worry, he's not here to start anything," Pumyra assured them as she and her companion disengaged themselves from their vehicles and walked toward the other two Thundercats.

"Then why is he here?" asked Lynx-O. His tone was not snide or accusatory, but it did hold a note of distrust.

"I'm here to get take the children off your hands," Alluro told them. Lynx-O immediately frowned when he heard the Lunatac's voice. This Lunatac sounded almost exactly like the hypnotic one called Alluro... yet Pumyra claimed he was someone else. The blind Thundercat debated whether or not to say anything, but he remained silent for the time being.

Bengali relaxed his grip on the hammer somewhat. "You're taking the kids?"

"That should make you happy, huh Bengali?" Pumyra said with a slight accusing tone in her voice.

Bengali said nothing in reply, but looked away. He felt a bit guilty that she was right. "Are they yours or something?" he asked the Lunatac.

"The baby is," Pumyra answered for him. She started up the hallway and beckoned for Alluro to follow her. "Come on, it's this way." He nodded and followed her silently. It felt strange to be in the Tower of Omens and not be trying to take it over. He supposed he should be mentally taking notes for the next time Luna planned a raid.

Bengali and Lynx-O followed behind Pumyra and Alluro in relative silence. Lynx-O still could not shake the feeling that there was something off about the Lunatac. He purposefully let himself fall a few steps further back to ensure he would be out of earshot of the other two. When Bengali also dropped back a bit, Lynx-O pulled him aside for a moment. "Bengali," he said in a hushed tone, "does this new Lunatac seem at all strange to you?"

"No stranger than any other. Maybe a little quieter and less outwardly violent."

"No, I mean in appearance. What does he look like?"

Bengali turned and took a final look at the Lunatac from behind before he disappeared around the corner with Pumyra. "He's one of those psychic-race type Lunatacs. On the tall side, dark gray hair, pretty long."

A frown crossed Lynx-O's normally calm countenance. "That sounds like a description of Alluro, from what I know of his appearance."

Bengali snorted with amusement. "Only if you take off about half his hair and oh, maybe twenty or thirty galacto years in age." He saw Lynx-O's serious expression and his humor faded. "What are you getting at, Lynx-O?"

"Perhaps you and Pumyra missed this but... when he spoke, he sounded exactly like Alluro. Not just similar, my hearing is developed enough to tell the difference... but a near perfect match. I've rarely heard two separate individuals sound that much alike."

"Maybe they sound kind of the same, but there's no way that's Alluro. Like I said before with all joking aside, he's just not old enough."

"Hmmm," Lynx-O said thoughtfully. "All right. Let's catch up with them, then."

Farther up the winding hallway, Pumyra led Alluro to the rooms where she had put the kids. Young RedEye was fast asleep on a guest bed in one, while baby Chilla, still in her snarf-bed, was sleeping in the other. Pumyra took him first to the room that held his "daughter", figuring he'd want to see her first. Alluro went over to the tiny bed and was relieved to see that Chilla was just fine, especially considering she was in the crash that had left the Ice Runner as scrap metal. He reached in and gently picked up the baby Lunatac, not wanting to startle the sleeping child. "Thank the gods I found you," he said softly, securing her in his arms so he could easily carry her.

Pumyra smiled, touched by the scene. She noticed that he certainly was gentle enough with her and that made her feel a little better, though she had reservations about releasing the baby into the care of another Lunatac. The little girl had started to grow on her, she realized sadly. Just then she heard a noise behind her, and saw Lynx-O and Bengali standing in the doorway. "Pumyra, may I talk to you privately for a moment?" Lynx-O called quietly. The puma nodded and started to walk over, only to be interrupted by a voice from the hallway behind the other Thundercats.

"What's going on?" RedEye, apparently awakened by the commotion in the hallway outside the door to his own guest quarters, emerged from his room and eyed them all suspiciously.

"Rrrowl, someone came to take you and the baby home," Bengali told him.

RedEye's eyes widened with shock and apprehension. "Who?" He pushed past Bengali and Lynx-O, and peered into the bedroom. He saw Alluro holding baby Chilla and he let out an angry shout. "You!" snarled the angry boy Lunatac in an accusing tone. "What are *you* doing here?"

Alluro remained calm and gave RedEye a stern look, one that warned the boy not cause any further trouble. "I came to take the two of you back to Skytomb, where you belong."

"I won't go back there," RedEye replied defiantly. "You can't make me."

"Don't be foolish. How am I supposed to solve our little dilemma if the two of you aren't in Skytomb? Besides, you don't belong with these Thundercats, you know that as well as I do," Alluro argued. "Now calm yourself down and come with me." He reached for RedEye's arm, intent on pulling him along if he had to.

"NO!" RedEye hollered back, trying to wrench his hand out of the older Lunatac's grasp. "I said you can't make me go and I'm not gonna! NOW LET GO OF ME, ALLURO!"

Alluro froze the second RedEye shouted his name. He barely had time to react to the shocked, then hostile expressions on the faces of the Thundercats, before Bengali and Lynx-O drew their weapons.

"I knew it," Lynx-O murmured.

"Alluro?" Pumyra was still in shock. "But..."

"I told you these kids were some kind of setup!" Bengali growled.

"Back off, Thundercats," Alluro warned. "I only came for the children, and now that I have them, I'm leaving."

"The hells you are, *Roren!*" Pumyra snapped, her voice dripping with sarcasm as she enunciated his alias. She quickly pulled off her belt so she could use it as a sling. "You aren't taking those innocent kids anywhere just so you and Luna can abuse them some more!"

"I already told you I had nothing to do with that!" Alluro retorted angrily. "And they're none of your concern, they aren't even your kind. Now get out of my way!" He started for the door with Chilla still in his arms.

RedEye stood back. "I'm not going back," he insisted, scowling at Alluro.

"It looks as though you had better start explaining yourself, Lunatac," Lynx-O said, stepping forward into the room and blocking the exit along with Pumyra and Bengali.

Alluro narrowed his eyes at them. "I owe you no explanation."

"Wrong," Pumyra argued. "You're going to explain, or you're not going one more step. Now tell me the truth, who are those children? And don't feed me that line about them being yours, either."

"And why do you look so much younger?" Bengali added, tapping his hammer impatiently. He was in the sort of mood where he would use any excuse at all to fire it at him.

Alluro looked back and forth, and saw that they were effectively blocking his way out. He wasn't sure he'd be able to hypnotize them all, especially not carrying a baby and having no help from the six-year-old boy who used to be his colleague having his own temper tantrum behind him. "You Thundercats are even more stupid than I thought. You really think these children are some strangers we kidnapped? Like we would voluntarily take on a couple of dependent and sometimes downright obnoxious brats—" he cast an angry glare at RedEye "—of our own free will?"

"You're saying you didn't?" Bengali said, frowning in puzzlement. "Where did they come from, then?"

"Look at me, and look at them, and you figure it out."

Pumyra and Bengali looked over the three Lunatacs in an effort to figure out exactly what he meant. "Well, you're younger," Bengali noted aloud.

Thinking about Bengali's statement, it suddenly dawned on Pumyra what Alluro had meant. *Those two kids look an awful lot like RedEye and Chilla... and the boy even called himself 'Red'...* "You don't mean to tell me that those kids are..."

"RedEye and Chilla, yes, I think that is exactly what he means," Lynx-O finished, apparently on the same wavelength. "Isn't it?"

Alluro nodded. "Yes."

"But how?" asked Bengali, astonished.

"Luna had a very brilliant," the sarcasm in his voice was heavy as he spoke the word, "plan to take a trip to the Geyser of Life so we could take a few years off our ages. But as you can see, RedEye and Chilla had a little accident there. So no, we didn't go off and kidnap any poor little Lunatacs from their mommies and daddies back on the Moons of Plundarr. Now that you know what happened, kindly let me out and I will take them back to Skytomb and leave you and your happy little Tower of Omens all alone."

"I'm not going back to Luna," RedEye spoke up again. "I'm not."

Alluro turned and faced his young teammate. "Please be reasonable, RedEye. Do me a favor and *try* to act the age you used to be, just this once?"

"If Luna beat him that badly the first time, who's to say she won't do it again?" Pumyra said. "To him or to Chilla?"

"That's right," Lynx-O agreed. "Whether they were our enemies as adults or not we cannot condone that now, not when they are merely innocent children."

"You blind old fool, can't you tell that I only want to help them? Do you think for a moment that I would be standing here tolerating all this nonsense of yours if I didn't?" Alluro said heatedly, trying to keep a lid on his temper. It was self-righteous behavior like they were displaying now that made him find the felines so irksome to begin with.

Bengali growled and raised his hammer at the insult to his friend, but Pumyra stepped in front of him. "All right, we get your point. So just how are you going to cure them, anyway? The Cave of Time? Maybe instead of fighting like this, we could help you. Might teach you Lunatacs a thing or two about being civilized."

"No, the Cave of Time is sealed up by a rockslide. It's not an option. Believe me, we checked. And I don't need or particularly want your help."

"Hey, the feeling's mutual," muttered Bengali. "You don't deserve our help anyway."

"What if we knew an easy way to reverse their conditions?" Pumyra asked.

"Such as?" Alluro challenged. "I've studied this condition day and night since it happened. There are no easy fixes."

"The Sword of Omens has an ability to restore things to their rightful condition. Perhaps Lion-O could be persuaded to help you."

"Depending on how well you grovel, anyway," Bengali added.

Alluro gave the Thundercat a cold, dark look. "I think I speak for both Chilla and RedEye when I say that we would sooner die than ask that pompous lion for a damned thing, especially involving that wretched sword."

"If our help is so beneath you then, why don't you just get out of our home and figure it out for yourself?" snarled Bengali. "Pumyra was just trying to be nice... something I think she does a little too easily if she wastes it on losers like you Lunatacs."

"It probably wouldn't work anyway," Lynx-O interrupted. "The Sword of Omens only works for those who serve the side of good. I doubt it would aid ones as irredeemable as you Lunatacs unless your lives were at stake."

"I have another idea," Pumyra suggested.

"What?"

Pumyra smiled a little, pleased to see that he was listening to her somewhat despite his stubbornness. "Mumm-Rana. She's a very powerful mage and she is merciful. She would not turn anyone who needed her help away from her. She even saved two of the mutants from death once. Her magic could probably restore RedEye and Chilla to their natural ages."

"Mumm-Rana? As if dealing with her evil counterpart wasn't bad enough," Alluro said, shaking his head in disgust. What bothered him even more was that he was actually considering it. The Thundercat was probably right, from what he knew of Mumm-Rana, she would likely grant that favor if he asked. *RedEye and Chilla better appreciate this*, he thought, almost nauseous at the idea. "All right, disgusting as this is for me to say, I'll go and see her. It's worth a try." He shook his head as he realized he had no idea how to even get to the white pyramid. "I don't suppose any of you have a map to the place, do you? Luna and Amok are the only ones of us who have ever been there."

"I can show you," Pumyra offered. "I'd like... well as corny as it sounds, I'd like a chance to say goodbye to the baby... I mean, Chilla... She's kind of cute, you know?"

"Too bad she grows up into someone like Chilla," Bengali commented.

Lynx-O's ears twitched and he stepped toward Pumyra. "Would you like me to go too, Pumyra? I could come along just in case—"

"In case I attack her, you mean?" Alluro interrupted.

"Can you blame us for thinking that you would?" Bengali countered.

Alluro sighed. "I suppose not. Come on, RedEye. You'll go with me for a cure to your age reversal, right?"

"As long as we don't go back to Skytomb."

"We won't," Pumyra assured him, heading back into the hallway.

Alluro took a deep breath and followed Pumyra, with Chilla still in his arms. Lynx-O and Bengali allowed him to pass this time, and RedEye followed behind Alluro. "I still can't believe I'm actually doing this," Alluro muttered with a shake of his head.

"Heh, neither can I," replied Pumyra. "But sometimes you have to do what you have to do, no matter how much don't like it."

"Isn't that the truth," he agreed.

Alluro followed Pumyra to the landing bay. She climbed into the Thunderstrike and motioned for him to join her. "It'll be a much faster trip if we just take this. It'll be easier on the kids too. Throw your jet pack in the back and we'll get going." He gave Chilla to RedEye and directed him into the Thunderstrike while he retrieved his jet pack, which he put behind one of the seats, and then climbed in himself. As soon as everyone was strapped in, Pumyra opened the Tower doors and started up the Thunderstrike's engines. Ten seconds later they flew off into the dark sky above, while Bengali and Lynx-O stood in the doorway and watched them go.

"I hope she knows what she's doing," Bengali worried to Lynx-O.

"So do I, my friend," Lynx-O agreed with a nod. "So do I."

The first ten minutes of the ride to Mumm-Rana's pyramid passed in near silence, with the exception being the occasional babble or gurgle from baby Chilla. RedEye sat sullenly in his seat, glaring at Alluro every once in a while. He didn't trust the adult Lunatac one bit, and the sight of the bruises Amok gave him only served to reinforce the idea that he shouldn't. Alluro himself was quiet and thoughtful, glancing back and forth from Chilla to Pumyra, who had the welcome distraction of having to pilot the craft.

When he could no longer stand the silence, he shifted position in his seat and addressed Pumyra with the issue that was weighing on his mind. "Why are you doing this?"

Pumyra turned and blinked, surprised at the question. "Because it's the right thing to do. Thundercats help those who need it."

A cynical smile crossed Alluro's features. "I should have expected an answer like that from you," he said with a shake of his head. "But it makes no sense to me. I would think one who is intelligent enough to earn the title of Thundercat would see that it's quite counterproductive to help an enemy who would just as soon see you suffer, or worse. Are you really that foolish?"

Pumyra shook her head in disbelief. "And you say *I'm* foolish? You're the one trying to sabotage your own rescue mission by running your mouth," she replied with a frown. She brought up the map to see how far they were from the white pyramid. "Only about 30 more miles, we should be there in a few minutes," she stated, changing the subject briefly before returning to the original chain of thought. "So what you're thinking is that I should have simply washed my hands of the three of you and let you all struggle to find your own solution, and if you didn't, 'oh well'?"

"You have to admit it doesn't make much sense. I hope you don't think this will change anything."

Pumyra let out a bitter laugh. "Oh no, I know better than to expect gratitude or even a shred of appreciation from someone like you."

"So judgemental... but not entirely inaccurate. As long as you know where we stand, there shouldn't be a problem, Thundercat."

"With you Lunatacs, there's always a problem," Pumyra muttered under her breath.

Alluro raised an eyebrow. "What was that?"

Pumyra glanced at the readings, then out the window. She could see the white pyramid ahead, glowing magnificently in the darkness and making an absolutely breathtaking contrast against the dark and starry sky above. "We're here," she answered, initiating the landing sequence. "Get ready." After a quick check to see if Alluro, Chilla, and RedEye were secure in their seats, she piloted the Thunderstrike to the clearing next to Mumm-Rana's pyramid.

Once on the ground they wasted no time in climbing out of the craft. Alluro carried Chilla, supporting her weight in his left arm, while RedEye followed him. The adult Lunatac silently looked to Pumyra. She began walking toward the ancient structure and indicated for them to follow, which they did, although not without a bit of reservation. The idea of ones as evil as they voluntarily entering a temple of goodness was not a comfortable one. It bothered Alluro most, but RedEye still knew that he should be worried too. He remembered all the evil things he had done in his adult past, though some of them didn't make as much sense as they might have had he still been in that form. Only Chilla it seemed was unaffected by it. Alluro figured that was a lucky break for her. The adult Chilla he knew would certainly have had a violent reaction to being taken to such a place, that was for certain.

They reached the side of the pyramid after a short walk. The pillars glowed brightly as they arrived. A moment later the stones slid aside to reveal a passage to the interior not unlike the way Mumm-Ra's pyramid had done for the Lunatacs many a time. A gentle, soothing voice called to them from within. "Enter."

Pumyra turned and faced Alluro and the children. "Ready?"

"As much as I ever will be," he answered with a shrug. Pumyra then walked through the doorway and he followed behind. RedEye in turn followed him, staying close. Alluro was not high on his list of favorites at the moment, but the mentality of his age currently overrode his pride and he was scared. He figured that if anything bad would happen, sticking by the big adult wouldn't be a bad idea.

They walked for several more minutes, following a guiding beam of light through the twisty passages until finally they arrived at the central chamber of the pyramid. Alluro was surprised to see how similar it was to Mumm-Ra's yet still very different. The sarcophagus, statues, and cauldron were all the same, but the interior was light and relaxing, as opposed to dark and oppressive. The statues were of handsome and heroic gods or spirits, and the waters of the cauldron were clear and beautiful instead of murky and forbidding. A figure shrouded in a dark blue hooded robe stood in front of the cauldron. "Welcome. So you have come to seek my help," she greeted them.

Pumyra stepped forward and nodded. "Yes, Mumm-Rana. Actually they're the ones that need your help." The puma indicated the group of Lunatacs. "I just showed them the way here."

"Yes," Mumm-Rana answered, turning her attention to Alluro and the children. She looked over the three of them carefully. "I know why you've come here. You wish for me to restore you to your rightful ages, right?"

Alluro nodded a yes.

Mumm-Rana took a few steps forward. "But I also know who you are and what you have done in your time on this planet," she stated, her voice taking on a slightly harsher tone. "I know of all the evil and cruelty you've visited upon innocent souls for no other reason than your own selfishness and greed. I'm sure you're also aware that your very own leader once tried to destroy me. So with all of that in mind, I ask you to tell me why I should help you."

Alluro didn't know quite what to do with her request. He pondered using his mind-control abilities to convince her that she had misinterpreted everything she'd seen and heard, or making excuses for it all, but on some level he knew it wouldn't work. He was powerful and could sway even the steadiest of minds, but to try it now, on a mage with her power, while he was tired and stressed, it was a shaky chance at best. He looked up and met the light priestess' eyes. "There's no reason that you should... but I'm asking anyway," he replied in a moment of brief, if not somewhat desperate, honesty.

Mumm-Rana remained silent for a moment before speaking again, her face not changing expression as she considered his reply. "Your candor surprises me. I didn't expect you to simply own up to your own misdeeds so easily. The fact that you didn't lie or try to falsely sway me shows that your motives are not evil."

Alluro blinked in surprise. "You mean you will do it, then?"

"Yes." Mumm-Rana raised her hand and pointed at the three of them. "Remain still and I will restore the three of you to your rightful ages." Off to the side, Pumyra smiled. Her general distrust and dislike for the Lunatacs had not changed, but it still made her feel good to know the mission had been a success. She watched closely as Mumm-Rana's fingers began to glow with power.

"Wait," Alluro interrupted the priestess. She lowered her hand and eyed him with a calm, questioning gaze. "You don't have to restore me," he said quietly. "I've decided I rather like being young again." It had been strange at first, especially since he had been against it all from the beginning, but after spending enough time being in his physical prime he realized it had some nice advantages to it. He didn't want to lose the strength and vigor—not to mention the hair—that he'd gradually lost over time now that he had it back. "Just bring them back," he said, setting Chilla down on the floor next to RedEye. "They're the ones that need it."

"You like the changes the Geyser of Life brought in you," Mumm-Rana remarked, reading his thoughts. "Now that you have your own youth back, even though it wasn't something you intended for, you want to keep it."

"Yes," Alluro admitted.

"So there is a second favor you ask of me, then. By not restoring you to the age you should be, I am technically extending your life by the years that water removed. That is a great gift and not one to be taken lightly. It would pain me greatly to think that you might use it as an opportunity to hurt even more innocent souls." She paced a bit on the platform above him. "But I will allow it. I am the ever-living source of compassion and kindness and I will give anyone a chance to prove himself worthy. I hope that you will keep my generosity in mind the next time that you feel compelled to commit an evil act."

Mumm-Rana then shifted her hand so it pointed only at RedEye and Chilla, and shot a powerful beam of bright light at the two child Lunatacs. Immediately their tiny figures changed shape and grew, aging years in seconds, until they were once again the age they were before they fell into the fountain. Mumm-Rana lowered her hand and raised the other and released a second beam, this time at not only Chilla and RedEye but at Alluro as well. "Now the three of you, return to your home." When the light cleared, only Pumyra remained in the pyramid with Mumm-Rana.

"You did it," Pumyra stated, then smiled at her. "Thank you."

Mumm-Rana merely nodded and returned the smile.

"Mumm-Rana... I have a question."

The priestess eyed the Thundercat. "Yes?"

"Do you think that Alluro will really appreciate what you did for him? That he would think twice about doing evil things? Or even RedEye and Chilla for that matter?"

"From what I know of the Lunatacs, probably not. But to deny them the chance would not have been right either."

Pumyra nodded. "I hope they do."

"As do I, my friend," Mumm-Rana agreed. "Take care, good Thundercat. I must return to my sarcophagus and rest."

Pumyra smiled and started for the exit. "Thanks again, Mumm-Rana," she called out, and gave a wave as she stepped into the passageway.

"You're welcome," Mumm-Rana answered. She then laid down in her sarcophagus and slipped back into her eternal rest.

Alluro, Chilla, and RedEye materialized in the control room of Skytomb. Luna, Amok, and TugMug were present, and the three of them jumped in startled surprise when the other Lunatacs simply appeared out of nowhere. TugMug was the first to recover, mostly because he noticed that the now quite adult Chilla was still not wearing any more than the diaper she had on as a child. "Welcome back, Chilla," he greeted her with a leer. "Looking good!" His statement made RedEye and Alluro each take a look as well. Both immediately broke into wide grins.

"What?" Chilla hissed. She glanced down and saw that she was almost completely naked. "What in the hells is going on? And wipe those looks off your faces, or I'll freeze them off," she snarled angrily. With no convenient covering to wrap around her, she instead sat in a chair and covered herself as best she could, crossing her arms across her chest and crossing her legs tightly, while giving the men a look that clearly said, 'one wrong move and you're dead.'

RedEye fortunately didn't have much of a problem as far as clothing went. The pants he'd been wearing as a boy were a bit big at the time... though now he realized they were much too small and uncomfortably tight. "You don't remember, Chilla? We got soaked in that fountain and turned into kids." The sight of a bruise on his arm reminded him of what had transpired, too. He didn't remember everything, but he remembered enough, and shot Luna, Amok, and TugMug a dark and angry look.

"You don't remember the fountain, and everything after?" Alluro questioned Chilla, taking a few steps toward her.

"I just said I didn't," Chilla replied irritably. "And what happened to you, did you take a swim in it too? And you, Luna?" she asked, looking over the younger faces of the two still-affected Lunatacs.

"I'm the one who got you and RedEye out before you vanished from existence," Alluro answered. "It turned you into a baby."

Chilla's eyes widened in disbelief. "A baby?"

"Yes," Luna noted with a hint of disgust in her voice.

"But... who took care of me? How did I get back?"

"I did, mostly," Alluro answered. "And Mumm-Rana restored the two of you."

"Well Luna and TugMug sure as hells didn't do anything, that's for damn sure," RedEye commented coldly. "They were too busy taking their pent up frustrations with us out on me." He took a few steps toward Luna. "How dare you treat me like that?"

"You were an insolent brat," Luna countered. "I didn't give you anything you didn't have coming, but I suppose you've conveniently forgotten that part."

"I remember more than you think," he said disgustedly. "If Alluro hadn't intervened, you would have had Amok kill me."

"Well isn't Alluro just the hero today," Luna said sarcastically.

"Oh, shut up, Luna," Alluro interjected with disgust.

"At least he did something," RedEye argued to Luna. "All you did was sit around and run your mouth and have Amok do your dirty work for you."

"And how is that different from normal?" remarked TugMug.

Luna seethed with anger at the remarks while Amok growled and swung his fist first at RedEye, then at TugMug. "You two have a lot of nerve."

"I have a lot of nerve? No Luna, *you* have a lot of nerve. You're lucky I don't have my sidewinder right now, or I'd show you what I think of you and your orders and your babysitting skills," RedEye said angrily. "The gods sure as hell knew what they were doing when they kept you from finding a mate and reproducing, because I'd pity the hells out of whatever offspring might ever have the misfortune of calling you their mother."

"A second little Luna?" Chilla commented with a disgusted shudder. "Ugh, thank the gods for small favors."

Luna ignored Chilla's remark and focused on RedEye. "You'd better be careful how you toss those threats and insults around. Come near me with any weapon and I'll have Amok turn you into goo. It'll pale in comparison to what I did to your six-year-old self." She prodded Amok to head for the door. "But that is all I will say on this matter. It's over, I got what I needed from the fountain, and now it's time to move on and forget about it. It's been a very long and trying day, so I suggest we all get some sleep, and come tomorrow, I don't want to hear another word about this. Do you understand?" The question was clearly directed at all of them, and not just RedEye.

"Perfectly," RedEye growled in response. He then exited through the opposite door through which Luna was headed and went to his quarters. TugMug simply shrugged and bounded out, then Luna and Amok also departed, leaving just Alluro and Chilla in the control room.

"Looks like getting younger hasn't changed her much," Chilla commented.

"Unfortunately I don't think Luna will ever change," Alluro said with a shake of his head. He then looked at Chilla, trying valiantly to ignore the fact that she was still pretty much naked, and met her gaze. "So you really don't remember anything?"

"No, not really. A few vague images. I remember a lot of yelling and screeching—probably Luna—and some man putting me in a box with a blanket in it."

Alluro smiled. "Oh, that was me. What else do you remember?"

Chilla laughed a little despite herself. "Never would have figured you for a babysitter. But let's see... I also remember being in some sort of crash—"

"That would be the Ice Runner," Alluro informed her. "RedEye was not the best pilot, I'm afraid."

Chilla frowned and tapped and clenched her fingers into a fist. "I'll have to have a little word with him about that."

"Recall anything else?" Alluro asked.

"Some woman taking care of me for a while. That's about it. And then the guy—you, I guess—carrying me to some big place or something. And next thing I know I was here. So what exactly did happen?"

"The woman you remember is the Thundercat Pumyra," Alluro explained. "After Luna, or more precisely, Amok on Luna's orders, beat up RedEye, he took you and flew off in the Ice Runner. He wanted to get away from her. Not that I blame him... But anyway, he crashed and apparently the Thundercats found the two of them. They didn't know who they were but Pumyra took them in. She actually was quite fond of you, I think."

"A Thundercat?" Chilla's eyes widened with both surprise and disgust simultaneously.

Alluro nodded. "Yes, a Thundercat. It took me a while to find you, and believe me, it wasn't easy getting you away from them. I had to lie my way into the Tower of Omens to get you and RedEye, and then he blew my cover with a temper tantrum." Chilla let out a laugh at the last statement. Alluro also grinned as he continued. "I almost had to fight Pumyra, Bengali, and Lynx-O combined to get you and RedEye out of there, but at the last minute Pumyra offered to help and take us to Mumm-Rana, believe it or not."

"And you did it?" Chilla asked with complete disbelief. "*Why?*" She couldn't imagine voluntarily putting up with any of that for more than five minutes.

"Very simple, really," Alluro answered as a teasing grin spread across his face. "Babysitting a troublemaker like you was even worse."

The End