

ThunderCats

Bio-Booster Armor Guyver

The Coming Darkness

By Knight Writer

Episode One: Weddings and Reckonings

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"Why does this have to be so uncomfortable?" Lion-O asked, tugging at the sapphire robe. It enveloped him from shoulders to toes, his crown as king in place upon his head. He studied himself in the full-length mirror, resplendent in a blue ceremonial robe. His right arm was bare up to the elbow.

"It's the way with formal wear," Claudis said with a chuckle. "The least often one has to wear something, the more uncomfortable it must be." He, Lion-O, Tygra, Panthro, WilyKat, Bengali, Torr, and Snarf were all gathered in Lion-O and Cheetara's bedchamber. The King of New Thundera Colony stood before a full-length mirror, studying his reflection.

"Your wedding day," Panthro said, clapping him on the shoulder. "Never saw the bride comin', though."

"She used to babysit you," Tygra added with a grin.

"I know," Lion-O replied. "Funny how life works out."

"Just wait until the pregnancy really gets underway," Bengali said with a sympathetic shake of his head.

"I don't envy you that."

"Oh?"

"Pumyra was a holy terror," he went on. "Some nights, it was safer to sleep on the couch."

"She was THAT moody?" Lion-O asked.

"Pregnancy has a way of strangely altering a woman's hormones," Tygra offered in explanation.

"In layman's terms," Bengali said, "You're in for one hell of a roller coaster ride, Your Highness."

"I remember your mother when she was carrying you," Claudis said. "Only the gods know how I lived through that."

"It's not that bad, right?"

"Take it from me," Bengali said. "Her moods are gonna go from one extreme to the other. One minute, she can't keep her hands off you. The next, she's ready to plant a foot in your ass. But," he went on,

"when that baby's born... It's all worth it. You look into that tiny face and all the crap you dealt with doesn't mean anything."

"Kyranna's been all over me lately," Torr said. "Man, she's wearin' me out!"

"Isn't it a bad idea to do that?"

"Not necessarily, M'lord," Siberias said as he entered the room. "You can still have sex for quite a while. You just have to be more careful about it as the pregnancy continues."

"Um..."

"Oh, stop it. I'm a physician," he said with a grin. "This kind of talk doesn't embarrass me in the slightest."

"I always wanted to see this day," Snarf said, near tears.

"As have I," Claudis added. "Can you all excuse us for a moment?"

"Of course," Panthro said. One by one, the rest filed out until they were alone.

"I am so proud of you, my son," Claudis said, his sightless eyes stinging with tears. "Lion-O, I never thought I would live to see you take a bride. Much less Cheetara!"

"Strange how things work out, Father," he said.

"One can never predict fate," Claudis agreed. He hated himself for saying that, he'd played a large part in determining the fate of his own son.

"I'm just glad you're here," Lion-O said before embracing him. Claudis returned it, wondering how he'd tell his own son what he'd done.

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"Laheela, you were right," Cheetara said as she slid the gossamer panties up her legs. "Fahd is a WIZARD at making these!"

"I told you so," Laheela said as the garment slid over the Cheetah's buttocks. The fabric was incredibly smooth against her most private regions, yet hugged them very softly. "You see why so many women buy from that shop?"

"Consider me another customer."

"You might have to be a bit discreet in your orders," Myrlha said as she brought the braisiere over. "Try tends to freak out when dealing with Nobility types."

"Fahd's the one who makes the clothes," Kyranna said. Her stomach was just beginning to show as her and Torr's baby grew within her.

"True, but Try is awful high-strung," Laheela said as she brought the bra over and snapped it into place.

"Why is that?" Cheetara asked.

"Try... Well..." Myrlha began. "He had it rough."

"I see." Cheetara well knew that rape was not a crime inflicted exclusively on women. Her heart went out to that young man as she turned to the garment stand on which her simple white dress rested. As was traditional, the left sleeve was missing. As was also traditional, the royal bride and groom were expressly forbidden to see each other until the ceremony. Again in accordance to tradition, Lion-O was tended to by the men with her by the women. Cheetara had never understood the stylized ritual of a king taking a queen at his side.

"You can't even really see it yet," WilyKit said, running her hand across Cheetara's stomach.

"UKLP!"

"You okay?" Myrlha asked of Kyranna, who sat hunched over.

"I'm fine," she said. "This morning sickness is the worst."

"Just to let you know," Pumyra said as she sat Cheetara down.

"It's all downhill from here?" she asked.

"I wouldn't say that," she said as she reached for the sheer hosiery. Pumyra eased the fabric over Cheetara's leg, sliding it over the ankle and up to mid-thigh. "It's far too wild a ride."

"I don't get it," WilyKit said, "why is this so, I don't know, so ritualistic?"

"Traditions are important, young one," Jagara said, having come out of her strange hidey-hole for the ceremony. "They keep us in touch with who we are as a people. But, traditions are known to change, and this has changed considerably since the early days of the Unification."

"How so?" Cheetara asked while Pumyra slid the other stocking on. She imagined Lion-O being dressed by the other men, and banished it outright. She did not need to burst into hysterics right now.

"All that has remained is the food and keeping the king and future queen apart, as well as the ceremony itself. The garbing of the two... Let's say it was much simpler then."

"Your point?" Laheela asked with an arched eyebrow.

"A bride and groom should hide nothing from each other," Jagara began, "and this was once symbolized by the two of them undergoing the ceremony in the nude."

"ThunderCats used to walk about naked in the Lair all the time," Cheetara said.

"Yes, but the preparations for each required a ceremonial bathing in order to cleanse the mind, body, and soul of both." Silence reigned for several long seconds as each processed what that exactly meant.

"You're kidding," Cheetara said flatly.

"No. Not at all. Generations of kings and their queens were bathed by their attendants prior to a royal wedding."

"That's... really weird..." Laheela said lamely.

"I'm glad we got past that part," Cheetara said as she rose to don her dress.

"As am I," Jagara said, "as well as the consummation of the wedding requiring witnesses." Cheetara nearly stumbled at that.

"WHAT?!" The other women in the room beheld Jagara as though she had grown a third eye.

"We didn't always possess advanced science," she began, "and the parentage of the successor to the throne could not be in doubt. However, only the royal couple endured such scrutiny."

"Thank Jaga," Cheetara said, "that THAT part of the ceremony is well and truly in the past!" The rest nodded in agreement.

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Lisker hovered far above the estate which Gelroz called home. He had come here with no information and no plan, and hated making things up on the fly. But, he couldn't exactly call on the CIA or the DIA. As if he could have done so in his days as a Marine in Force Recon. The mission, he'd told himself, was to gather intel.

He'd gotten all he'd needed that morning.

Half a mile to the north was a vein rich in gold, which had already been mined. All the human readings his sensor medals had detected were of the adult variety, and what he saw at Chateau Gelroz confirmed his suspicions. The Tabbott kept the kids as his own personal servants. So long as the adults toed the line, the kids stayed safe.

The house itself had aspirations to an ancient plantation manor. The front facade was decorated with pillars supporting an ornate upper balcony. The stone was grey, unpolished. This Gelroz, it seemed, was either working his way up or had little to no sense of aesthetic design. On the western end of the grounds were shacks which housed the slaves when they were not laboring.

Or, so it all seemed.

Lisker scanned again, just to be sure. Twenty humans, one Tabbott, and fifteen Trollogs. Not hard to determine who the bad guys were, there. The mine had been a slightly different story, with thirty Trollogs and nearly one hundred humans. The discrepancy between the number of human adults and children had a few explanations, but Lisker didn't bother himself with them. He had power to spare, but

resources to make a poor man weep.

A bell tower, rather incongruous with the overall style of the manor, sailed above the roof. To summon them all somewhere? Likely. There, in the rear courtyard of the manor, was a patch of land beaten to mere dirt.

I know all I'm gonna learn, he thought, knowing it wasn't strictly true but thinking it anyway.

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Gelroz sat at the head of the elongated table. Meant to host dozens, the other chairs sat empty at present. That would one day change. He dug his fork into a slice of apple, his favorite, as he contemplated the moves he'd make next.

Legitimate business appealed to him. His last foray into that field had flopped, costing him much of his family's fortune. However, the slave trade had made a good portion of that back. What was better than workers you didn't have to pay? Discovering the Clutch had been his crowning moment. Yes, they were brutal, but they had gotten results. Until their new leader had arrived.

Gelroz chewed a slice of apple. The Clutch had been useful, but he hadn't kidded himself about keeping them in his employ forever. The proceeds from the gold mine had given him options. He could buy into a promising business, and reap THEIR profits. Keeping people as slaves was passe', he thought. With the gold that had been mined, he was flush with assets again.

Another slice of apple, and his thirst rose again.

"BOY!" he shouted. The young boy kneeling in the corner jerked before shooting to his feet. THAT one would fetch a nice price. "Get me more coffee!"

"At once, Master Gelroz," he said before scampering over and taking the cup.

"Hi," Lisker said companionably as he set down in front of the two Trollogs which guarded the door. Two more, he knew, were on the other side. "I'm here to see Gelroz." Their eyes bulged and jaws dropped at the sight of him. "I suggest you open the door." This he said in a far colder voice. "Now."

"No one..." The Trollog on the left got no farther. The one on the right made even less progress as he grabbed them by the sides of their heads and smashed them together with a thick-sounding crunch. The guards went down in a heap, dead. Lisker wasted no time in smashing the front doors open with a front kick which sent the thick oaken barriers flying inward to smash into the two guards along the wall. They were dazed when he dashed in, dead once he whirled and fired his head beam into their skulls. The

noise of approaching guards reached him long before any of them could arrive.

The children - all filthy and scared out of their wits - stared at him in open-mouthed shock. He felt a twinge of regret at that, wishing that kids didn't have to see what was about to happen. The voice of his father chimed in from the past with one of the man's more favored aphorisms: "Wish in one hand, shit in the other, and tell me which fills up first".

The foyer was massive, though done in entirely drab grey. Several pillars lined the central floorspace with a grand staircase situated in the center to the upper balcony. Two lesser staircases curved along the outer walls to the edges. Lisker counted five children, one on each staircase and two cleaning the columns. Just coming into view were the remaining guard force.

Lisker wasted no time, firing on the three which were headed for the central stairs. They fell without a sound. The children remained frozen, trembling at the sight of the carnage. One Trollog yanked open the door which he knew Gelroz and another human were behind. The rest charged down the smaller staircases.

He fired the Head Beam two more times, before either of those could get near the kids, then leapt up to the upper balcony. So far, things were going smoothly. Any soldier would find cause to worry about that.

"SIR!" The Trollog bellowed on bursting in on his breakfast.

"What is it?! What's going on out there?" The Trollog looked over his shoulder, blanched, and the expression on his face chilled Gelroz's blood before the first word was spoken.

"THEY'RE DEAD!" he shouted. "DEAD!"

"STOP THEM, YOU FOOL!" Gelroz demanded. He noticed the boy trying to crawl under the table as he slammed the door.

Lisker glared at the Trollog, the last of the house guards, as he stomped closer. "You gotta be kidding me," he said before turning tail and charging toward one of the secondary stair cases. Lisker paused, considering shooting him, when the decision was taken out of his hands.

The Trollog turned, his feet tangling just before he tumbled down the steps to the tune of many bones snapping.

"You," he said, pointing at the shivering girl on the stairs the Trollog had fallen down to his death. "The bell up top is to call everyone, right?" She nodded jerkily. "Wanna do me a favor, sweetie?" he asked, his voice much more gentle. "Ring the bell." She nodded before darting up the stairs to the highest level.

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Sho stood in the Royal Hall, casting glances at Seres Mandora on the opposite side of the wine-colored carpet. They were the only guests at this wedding. True, it had been an honor, but in the empty expanse of the hall, the sight of her triggered strange questions in the depths of his mind. Memories began to stir. Memories that, he knew, were not his own.

Mandora was from another planet, yet was human. Humans had never, not once, travelled interstellar. More strange memories flared like flashbulbs in his mind, of him floating in a liquid environment, his control medal coming apart...

Sho gasped, realizing what had happened. The memories were from the Relic, the Iseki, the ship of the Advents. No, he corrected himself, the Uranus. The ones who... Who had created humans on this planet. Sho's spine turned to ice at that. Yes, he remembered. The chill spread to his heart. They had created humans to be the final step toward Zoanoids. From the memories he'd inherited from the Relic, they had left after a...

He knew. The Uranus had become curious as to how a human would react to their armor. The terrifying results forced them to leave and try to destroy the planet. Something had thwarted their attempt, what he could not recall, but who was to say they hadn't set up shop somewhere else? They had to have learned from that mistake.

How many worlds, Sho thought, bear the seed of the Uranus? Could Shiner and his crew be one of the exceptions? How else could another planet develop a species so similar to mine WITHOUT their interference?

"Sho?" Mandora asked. "What's wrong?"

"Think I'm coming down with something." The response sounded lame even to him. She eyed him as though she knew he was lying, yet said nothing. Had the Uranus.... he thought. Is it possible...?

Had they repeated their experiments on other worlds? Having learned their lesson regarding humans and their own armor on Earth, did they try again elsewhere? The bells began to ring, signalling the start of the wedding ceremony.

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Lisker swung a free chair around with his foot, sitting on it and planting Gelroz onto the seat in front of him.

"What ARE you?" he asked in a wheeze of fright. The Tabbot's eyes bulged, his normally pink skin the color of old milk. Lisker considered several options before responding.

"Someone who's fed up with your shit," he snarled in reply.

"What?"

"I know you hired the Clutch." His sensor medals registered an enormous leap in Gelroz's heartrate.

"They tried to choke off a town. I stopped them. Now, I'm here for you."

"DON'T KILL ME!" Gelroz wailed. Lisker chuckled at that. He had far worse plans for the Tabbot slave dealer. The bell above the manor rang out, clear as crystal.

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The chimes sounded a scant second before the doors to the Royal Hall opened. Tygra marched slowly forward, bearing in his hands a cord of rope interwoven with gold. Sho had little experience with Thunderian weddings, but knew that on their homeworld another metal would have been used. He stood ramrod straight until Tygra reached his place just before the pedestal which now housed two thrones.

The chimes changed tone, and he dropped to one knee in time with Mandora. Lion-O entered, surrounded by his entourage. Another slow march took place, each man stepping in time to the bell, everyone stone silent. Royal weddings, he'd been told, were silent affairs aside from the one officiating them.

Thank God, he thought, MY wedding won't be like this. Sho pictured his marriage to Myrlha, remembering the simple ceremony for Bengali and Pumyra. Lion-O reached his place before Tygra, the men accompanying him filing off to stand at intervals to the left and right of the wine-colored carpet. The tone of the chimes changed again just before Cheetara appeared in the entrance. She strode gracefully up the aisle, followed by the women who bore the title of ThunderCat. They all marched in time, and Sho caught Myrlha's eye for a brief moment before they passed. Cheetara stood next to Lion-O. The wide spaces between the men were occupied by the women. Tygra began to speak.

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Lisker walked out to the space where the adult slaves had gathered. He held a bound Gelroz in one hand as he surveyed the gathered multitude. All were staring in shock. The Trollogs were nervously fingering

their weapons. Behind him, the children were gathering. Tension was tight in the air.

"Trollogs," he began, having set the sonic buster on his face for maximum voice projection, "drop your weapons, leave now, and no harm will come to you. By my hands, at least." Lisker saw children and adults both fidget, wishing to be re-united. He saw the remaining Trollogs stare at the piled bodies of Gelroz' retainer force. "I don't want to kill any more of you, but I will if I have to." The Trollogs got the hint, lowering weapons and turning to leave.

"I PAY YOU TO PROTECT ME!" Gelroz wailed petulantly. The Trollogs pretended not to hear as they walked, then ran, in every direction that did not lead towards Lisker.

"Well, then," Lisker went on. He knew this next part would be the most important. "Ladies and gentlemen, you are now all free." He waited for a moment for that to sink in.

"To do what?" a man in the crowd bellowed. "Free to die?! It's WINTER!"

"You all see this house behind me?" Lisker asked, jerking a thumb over his shoulder. "I know you all hate this place, but it's shelter. Inside is food and treasure for you all to rebuild your homes. Kinda fitting, since the thugs Gelroz hired stole it from you all in the first place." He was met with murmurs of agreement.

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Lion-O and Cheetara stood side-by-side, their bare arms facing each other. Tygra stretched out the length of rope in his hands.

"Two souls," he began, winding the braided cord about their wrists as their fingers joined, "brought together in matrimony. By this cord, are you bound to each other." Another loop. "Each twist a symbol of your love." Which was not always part of the picture. "Of your bond."

All remained silent as Tygra wrapped the ceremonial cord.

"Two, united as one," he intoned. "Two hearts, two souls. With the knotting of this cord," at that, Tygra tied a loose knot, "I proclaim these two as one. King and Queen." Lion-O and Cheetara faced each other, the cord binding them having more than enough slack, and kissed. Thunderous applause threatened to tear the roof off as the newlyweds shared their matrimonial kiss. The dam broke at that moment, all present releasing cheers.

"It is my pleasure to introduce," Tygra began, "the bride of our king. LONG MAY THEY REIGN!"

The cheer within the Royal Hall was deafening.

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"So, what about him?!" shrieked a woman who was clad in tatters. Her feet were bare and as calloused as her hands from toiling in the nearby mine for gold. Like the rest, she was covered in grime to the point that her actual skin tone was nearly impossible to determine and the oily ropes of black hair hung about her wild-eyed face. She appeared borderline derranged. Fury smoldered in the eyes of adults who cradled their children, even hotter in many of those who did not.

Please, Lisker prayed to any kind-hearted diety, let this go where I think it is!

"And what about those of us the fucker sold?!" a man roared. The murmur of the crowd quickly built to a low roar, and Lisker felt the situation spiralling out of control.

"Listen!" he shouted as the list of complaints against Gelroz grew both in length and volume. They ignored him utterly until he traced a line in the hardpacked dirt before them with the head beam. Silence crashed on the assembled multitude. "As for the ones he sold, there's nothing I can do. All I can do is help those of you still here."

"We thank ya kindly," another woman said, a child in each arm. Lisker tried, and failed, not to be reminded of "The Grapes of Wrath". This was indeed a sorry enough lot for that book.

"I lost my sons when that fucker's thugs sacked my town!" the wild-eyed woman shouted.

"I didn't kill them!" Gelroz shouted indignantly.

"YOU HIRED THE GODDAMN MURDERERS WHO DID!" she bellowed, to the agreement of, well, everyone.

"She's got a point," Lisker said, bringing Gelroz up to his face. "You've racked up a load of debt to these people." Gelroz's jaw dropped open, his eyes bright lanterns of terror. Lisker felt the satisfaction take root in his gut, spreading its roots and blossoming in his heart.

"You wouldn't..." Gelroz croaked. The anticipation built in the assembly of humans, a presence that was not all together pleasant. Then, low enough for only Gelroz to hear, "Sucks to be you, piggy." Without futher preamble, he casually tossed Gelroz. The Tabbott spun four times before landing at the feet of the wild-eyed woman, an added bit of cruelty toward the former slave trader. To the assembled humans: "Have fun with that." Lisker activated the gravity controller, rocketing into the sky as the screams first began.

God, but that felt GOOD! he mentally cheered as he raced back toward Watershed. Lisker kept his sensor medals dormant. Knowing he'd had a part in seeing justice done was enough. Scanning the gory details would make him a monster. Just as with what may, or may not, have happened to Mezzo after

his departure from Watershed, he felt no need to know.

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In the courtyard of Cat's Lair, most of the residents of the colony had gathered to witness the emergence of their new queen. A massive, boisterous cheer arose the instant the main doors opened and only swelled as the Royal Couple emerged flanked by the other ThuderCats. Hope bloomed anew for many of the cheering throng at another sign that their race was on the path to recovery.

"Isn't that dress beautiful?" Avril asked, shouted more like, at the way the material clung to Cheetara's... QUEEN Cheetara's... shapely body.

"Yeah, she really pulls that look off alright," Etain said, forcing herself not to stare too closely. Avril could sometimes get possessive.

"Maybe I'll wear one like it someday." Avril's eyes got the distant, dreamy look they always did when fantasizing.

"Say what?"

"I mean... It's always been a dream of mine to wear a beautiful dress on my wedding day."

Uh-oh, Etain thought. She thought the institution to be meaningless, if two people loved each other and were happy, who cared if they went through a ceremony and made it official?

"I don't think I could pull that look off," Etain said as Lion-O and Cheetara walked through the parting crowd. It seemed the safest route. Marriage was a subject neither had seen a need to bring up.

"You'd also make a beautiful bride," Avril replied, sliding an arm about her trim waist. Stunned at the overt display of affection in public (Avril could be near-prudish out and about), Etain blurted out the first thing that crossed her mind.

"Just so long as that fantasy of yours doesn't involve cubs." She felt Avril stiffen beside her. "Uh... In the natural way, of course." Etain nearly breathed a sigh of relief when Avril relaxed again. Etain had no fears regarding commitment, she was more committed to Avril than she had been to anyone, but the thought of raising cubs frightened her. It was the ultimate responsibility, and one she didn't think herself cut out for.

"Yes, there's that. Well, you never know, a cub might find its way into our lives somehow."

"Yeah." Etain linked her free hand with Avri's, their fingers interlocking. Just no time soon, I hope, she thought.

"By the way, Etain?"

"Hm?"

"That was a nice save back there."

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"You should have some of this bread," Fahd said as he walked through the merriment taking place in the Central Plaza. Tryphon walked beside him, silently fuming.

"I SHOULD be working on that tapestry I got commissioned for," he snarled, crossing his arms over his chest.

"You're almost done with it, and it's magnificent. I think it captures the Vanguard brilliantly. Come on, I'm always telling you that you don't eat enough."

"And you like to strap on the feed-bag. How do you NOT gain weight?"

"I have a metabolism like a Thundrillium reactor," Fahd said with his usual serene grin in place. "I just wish we could have gotten into the courtyard of the lair. It's not every day a king gets married."

"It's not every day ANYONE gets married!" Tryphon snapped. "What's your point?"

"Oh, just relax and enjoy the festivities," Fahd said, holding out a small loaf of bread. To his relief, Tryphon took it (or snatched it) from his hand and began to nibble on it. "You enjoyed yourself when we celebrated the official first day of the colony."

"First: I had help. Second: That help gave me a hangover."

"Hence you still being sober." After that night, Tryphon had steered away from alcohol. They walked along in silence, ducking around laughing and dancing people of Thunderian, Wollo, and Bolkin lineage alike.

"Fahd."

"Yes?" Tryphon seemed to struggle with something, his lips working yet no sound coming out.

"Thanks. For today. And the bread, I guess." Fahd stroked his hand across Tryphon's shoulders and was glad to find the younger man not tensing up or slapping it away outright.