

ThunderCats

Bio-Booster Armor Guyver

The Coming Darkness

By Knight Writer

Episode Two: Test of a Lifetime, Part 1

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It surprised Aptom to find that Commander Ratar-O's personal quarters aboard the Warhammer were so spartan. He would have thought that the Mutant warmonger would live in extravagance, it would have fit given what he had learned about Plun-Darr life so far. The man... rat... sat before him on a somewhat plush sofa with that bastard Meliz standing at rigid attention behind him. He made a mental note not to underestimate this particular Mutant.

"Your progress, Dr. Gireg?" he said in the brusque voice of a man used to being in command.

"I have found that the chemical agents and biological fluids are used to give beings the ability to make rapid changes to their own DNA in accordance to a set pattern for a set result." THAT had been easy enough. Aptom, Lost Number or not, had been a Zoanoid. "It seems that this process was developed specifically for a single species."

"Humans."

"Yes, sir, exactly." No, this Ratar-O was definitely not a fool. Or, he thought, not a TOTAL one. "I don't mean to overstep my bounds, but I assume you want to apply this to Mutantkind?" The commander's eyes took on a hard glint at that, then relaxed.

"I thought you'd figure that much out at least."

"Beg pardon, but being a scientist means having a working brain. I'm not a Simian." That got a short chuckle from Ratar-O. "Sir, have you considered what you're attempting?" Not that Aptom cared, but he had to play his part. Shakespeare on acid, he told himself yet again, as directed by Quentin Tarantino and Tim Burton. Somehow, that thought no longer gave him a headache. "It's my considered opinion that you'll need a way to control..."

"Don't worry about that," Ratar-O said, brimming with confidence. "Just stick to your lab work."

"Regarding that," Aptom said, "Many of the substances we need can't be found here. Do you know of

other..."

"I know of them. There is one, in fact, that has caught my eye." He tapped a few commands on the surface of the table, activating the monitor recessed into the wall. Aptom/Gireg turned about and saw a map of the United States on the flat screen. One region in particular was selected. A spot in what was once Arizona which was now a swamp.

The man has some scary good means of digging up intel, if he found what's left of Celestial Hall, Aptom thought. Caught his eye, my ass!

"This was the the site of a major research and distribution center," Ratar-O explained. Aptom knew the truth of it, but not if Ratar-O was lying about it. "The swamp has an unusually high concentration of strange mutagenic compounds."

"I recommend setting up our major research there. I would like to test samples of that bog." Aptom felt a chill race through him as he matched this piece with Ratar-O's statement that he had controlling any newly developed Zoanoids in his pocket.

"I concur. Dismissed, Gireg."

"Sir." Aptom took his leave, barely noticing the spotless corridors on the way back to his lab. It was a series of coincidences on the level of winning the lottery by using one's birthday. Did he know about Zoalords? Why would he...

The thought nearly made his knees buckle, and it made perfect sense. What if Ratar-O had somehow found a way to turn HIMSELF into a Zoalord? Aptom shook his head at that. If he had THAT knowledge, then he wouldn't need scientists to learn how to make Zoanoids. But still...

What are you planning? he silently asked as he stalked through the corridors of the Warhammer.

"Thoughts?" Ratar-O asked as Meliz sat down.

"I'm not sure. He spends nearly all his time in that damn lab."

"As a good scientist should," Ratar-O replied as he reached for the bottle of Kirgash he kept hidden and poured two steaming mugs full. "Still, you suspect him."

"I don't know why, father," he said, "it's...."

"A hinky feeling," Ratar-O finished.

"I haven't found anything conclusive."

"Then, what have you found?" Ratar-O took a sip. "Recall your lessons."

"If I haven't found guilt, then I haven't dug deeply enough," Meliz quoted. "I have one thing, but I don't know how significant it is."

"Out with it!"

"Many of the men aboard have stopped availing themselves of the women."

"Strange, but not overly so," Ratar-O said. "Even fucking gets old after a while."

"True, but this has me worried."

"Then follow your nose," Ratar-O said. "First thing tomorrow, I want to see plans of approach to this place... this Arizona... that won't alert the ThunderCats."

"As you command."

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"Ready?" Panthro asked as Sho and Myrlha entered the hangar. The two ThunderCycles sat ready in the middle of the menagerie of parts Sho could not have put names to on a bet. Beneath his arm was a helmet in the shape of a cat's head, the visor over the open mouth up. Myrlha, Panthro, and Mandora each sported the same helmets.

The ThunderCycles were as different as night and day. While both had dual wheels front and back, their aesthetics were far removed from each other. The one Sho approached strongly resembled an ancient Yamaha with angular lines and a low-slung design. Panthro's personal bike, however, strongly resembled an old Harley. The front forks were longer, the entire shape of the bike more laid back. Yet, it seemed to scream power.

"We have a long ride ahead of us to the Village of Scholars." Panthro said as he sat on the monster machine.

"Let's go," Sho said, donning his own helmet and sitting atop his bike. Myrlha sat behind him, with Mandora taking a seat behind Panthro. Both kicked the bikes to life, the higher whine of his own ThunderCycle making counterpoint to the low rumble of Panthro's. The front forks of each bike ended in clawed cat's paws with the headlamps shining from the mouths of stylized cat's heads. The visor came down, revealing an HUD which showed their current location and directions they needed to ride in. Both accelerated, rocketing the bikes toward the Village of Scholars. Warm, early spring morning sun greeted them as the bikes angled toward the curving access road which led around the periphery of the Colony proper. They rode, seeing the farmers tending to the matters of planting new wheat. Men and women rode on compact tractors which pulled plow blades to furrow the earth. He thought to wave, then thought better of releasing one of the handlebar grips. This ride was about more than testing the long range and off-road ability of the ThunderCycle designs, they were also to hone his skill in riding one.

He couldn't stick to spaceboards forever.

"Coming to the dirt," Panthro's voice said in his ear via the commlink in the helmets.

"Got it." On reaching the end of the access road, it wouldn't do to have armored vehicles tearing through the busy streets, Sho engaged the off-road setting. Thick, gripping nubs of hard rubber extended from the tires once road gave way to grass. "Looks good, Sensei."

"Just don't go pretending to be Cheetara on that thing," the ThunderCat gently chided. "They gyro compensators solve a lot of balance issues with these things, but I don't want you and Myrlha to get hurt."

"Aw, Panthro, you DO care!" Myrlha gushed.

"Yeah, yeah." All four had a laugh at that. Open plains and endless sky stretched ahead of them. Myrlha pressed herself into his back, and suddenly it made sense. Sho had never been able to parse the mystique of motorcycles during the age of Second Earth until that moment. The wind blowing across his body, the power of the machine at his command, the open air, and the woman he loved holding onto him, trusting her life to his skills with the machine.

"Doin' pretty good over there," Panthro said.

"I never realized how awesome this was!" Sho exclaimed. "All I need is a black leather jacket, and this'll be PERFECT!"

"I KNEW I left something outta the design!" Panthro hooted. "Good call, Kid!" It was Panthro's name for him, and would not change nor would Sho calling Panthro "Sensei". "Thanks for bringin' it up!"

"Anytime." Sho clicked off as the countryside blurred past them. Yeah, he thought, this beats spaceboards with a lead pipe.

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"Why," Tryphon began as the mule-drawn wagon they were riding in neared the gates of the town of Watershed, "did I EVER let you convince me that this was a good idea?" His rant was muted for the sake of the humans, Wollos, and Bolkins riding in the cart with them. Of all the passengers in this wagon, in the caravan that had picked them up several days previous, only they had been able to squeeze their wares in with them. The rest had theirs in the load-bearing wagons.

"You convinced yourself, Try," Fahd replied. "You were the one who said we needed more material."

"Me and my big mouth," Tryphon said as guards armed with strange rifles came alongside the wagon's driver. "I'll never get these callouses off my ass," he muttered as the two performed a cursory, yet

surprisingly thorough, search of the wagon.

"Bags," one said, looking directly at them. Fahd immediately opened them, revealing lengths of fabrics, finished clothes, and other doo-dads for sale. The guards unceremoniously thrust their hands in, found nothing, and stepped back. "Sorry," the one on the left said, "we had some bad trouble last year. It's over, now, though. Enjoy your stay in Watershed." The wagon moved forward again and the emerging bustle of Watershed greeted them.

"So, where to?" Tryphon asked. "See a likely spot?" Almost all of the stalls were empty. According to the trader from whom they'd gotten the silk, any empty stall was up for grabs. The only rules were that, once claimed, another couldn't take it. "Stop standing so close!" he hissed.

"What?"

"Dolt, this isn't the Colony," Tryphon snarled. "We're getting enough stares from our looks!" Fahd, realizing what Tryphon meant, took a discrete step back.

"Hi!" cried a chipper female voice. Both turned to see a Wollo woman clad in pants and a shirt rush up to them. Fahd recalled her, after thinking a moment, from the site of Fortress Plun-Darr, but little else.

"Hello!" Fahd called in return as she drew to a stop. She smiled up at them, genuinely happy.

"How is Laheela?" the Wollo asked. Both Tryphon and Fahd then recalled her.

"You're Maria!" Fahd exclaimed. The woman who had helped free them all.

"That's me!" she said. "So glad to see you here!"

"Yeah, um, nice to see you, too," Tryphon said quietly. Both men looked at her, both trying to recall something about her.

"Where are you setting up shop?"

"Oh, just there, I think," Fahd said as he pointed to an unoccupied kiosk near the front gates of Watershed.

"Good choice," Maria said, "but you might want to hurry. Prime spots get taken fast. I'll be back for you around sundown."

"What?" Tryphon sputtered.

"You need a place to stay, and lodging here can be pricey if you don't want to stay in a tent. I'll get a nice supper prepared, and bring you to my place."

"You don't..."

"I'll see you then," she said, nodding once before dashing off. Fahd shrugged while Tryphon nearly bristled.

"What the HELL did we get roped into?" he asked.

"A good spot to do business, if we get to that stall in time," Fahd said. "I know how tight with a coin you can be, so free room and board should be a great deal."

"You better not get us in a fix," Tryphon said as they moved to claim the booth.

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"Oretharsis," Jagara said as she waved her hand above the sealed chest containing the Treasure of Thundera. Nestled in the deepest depths of Cat's Lair, it sat protected by technology she didn't fully understand, and by magic she'd helped cast. The lid popped silently open to reveal the glittering contents. The Totem of Dera, which she tried not to touch. The Chain of Loyalty, more a psychological artifact than a magical one. Others, whose eldritch purpose even she dared not reveal. Finally, her questing fingers discovered it. Jagara pulled free the Book of Omens, the most sacred of their artifacts. An object whose power rivalled, and in some ways exceeded, that of the Eye itself. Only Jagara knew its true power, and true purpose. Dark times were coming, dark enough for her to reveal it to her king. Jagara reached into the chest again, and her hand came up bearing the Key.

The Eye, the Key, and the Book, she thought, staring at the two in each hand, together again. I had always hoped I would never see this day. Part of her hoped it to be a dream, yet she knew it was not. The ancient prophecies of Thundera, to think they'd be tied to those of Third Earth! What force in the universe deemed that to be so?

Jagara tucked the Book under one arm and the Key in the sparse brassiere she wore. Even she did not really know how the Guyvers factored into what destiny had decided. She only knew her role in it.

"Hello Claudis," she said without turning. "I knew you'd be here."

"Far be it from a former king," he began, "to ask what you intend to do with the two most important pieces of our legacy." Claudis stepped up beside her, his face serene. "I trust that it involves my son."

"Yes," she replied.

"And," he continued, "that there is far more to this prophecy than you, Mumm-Rana, or even Jaga have revealed."

"You are correct."

"Jaga was my closest friend, you know," Claudis said. "But, even he kept things from me. I never doubted his reasons, of course. Our loyalty was to the people of Thundera first, even before each other."

"Lord Claudis, if you please, can we cut the crap?" Jagara asked, irritated.

"I want to know if what you're up to will harm my son," he said bluntly.

"He may," Jagara admitted, "but the life of a king is not free from peril."

"No. No, it is not." His shoulders slumped at that.

"What I do," she began, "I do for the good of all who live on this world. It will be hard on him, but he must go through this."

"Isn't Sho's power enough?"

"As it stands, no."

"By the gods... What are we up against?!"

"You will know, and far sooner than I would like." A shudder of fear ripped through her rejuvenated body. "I can say no more. Please, trust me."

"I cannot see any other option." Jagara nodded once before turning about to take her leave.

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Lion-O relaxed in the overstuffed recliner in the foyer of his royal quarters. A tray bearing an impressive array of steaming covered dishes sat between him and the empty chair which was Cheetara's. The murmur of the raining hot water was a low hum as he viewed the daily reports from the various ares of New Thundera Colony. With nothing pressing on the day's agenda, he found himself with a rare day off that he fully intended to enjoy with his wife.

Yet again, that word appeared from around a blind corner. Cheetara was now his wife, the mother (soon to be) of his child. It still knocked him for a loop from time to time. He barely noticed the dull roar of the shower ceasing. She emerged and strode up to him minutes later, a towel wrapped about her body and another about her hair and her skin seeming to glow in the morning light that beamed through the window.

"Smells wonderful," she purred as she uncovered a dish of scrambled eggs. Her appetite had been steadily increasing over the course of the past winter, yet her stomach was only beginning to round out.

"What's that weird phrase for 'Eat up'?"

"Bon Appetite," she replied after swallowing. "I think the language was called 'French'." He had never seen her so ravenous before. Cheetara had always been mindful of what she ate. Seeing her bolting down her breakfast, though, made him love her all the more. She was, all told, eating for two. Or three. She was due for a checkup later in the week and twins were not uncommon in Thunderian pregnancies.

Twins? he thought. May Jaga help me on that one!

"Tygra's done well so far," he said, digging in to his own meal. For the sake of his own duties concerning the day-to-day affairs of running the Colony, his Anointment Trials had been broken up. The less physically demanding ones had been met, and passed, during the winter months. Kyranna, Siberias, and Pumyra had each tested him on medical matters which his own experience on Third Earth had stood him in good stead. Myrlha's Trial of Agility had been held in the Lair's gym. Laheela's Trial of Marksmanship had been held in the courtyard (with observers standing well clear). Torr's Trial of Agriculture had been held in the livestock stables. Bengali's Trial of Metalworking in his own forge, and Lynx-O's Trial of Sight in the halls of Cat's Lair, complete with a blindfold for Tygra. Cheetara's Trial of Speed, however, had been first due to her advancing pregnancy. The most dangerous challenges remained ahead of him, and the first was today.

"Going up against Kat and Kit," Cheetara said, placing her cup of decaf back on its saucer. "I don't envy him. I didn't envy you, for that matter."

"The Maze of Infinity was bad enough," he said, "this Trial of Traps sounds even worse." The pair had left a week previous to set up the traps and tricks in a stretch of the western fringe of the Unicorn Forest the Keepers had agreed to keep their herds away from for the duration. "What I don't envy him is Panthro's test."

"It'll be much different from yours."

"How so?"

"There are three tests of strength," she explained after another sip of coffee. "Strength of the body, strength of the mind, and strength of the will."

"The Anointment Trials test all of that," he said, recalling his own run through the gauntlet.

"Exactly. Panthro chose to test the body, and the best way he knew how was to fight you. You didn't have to win, just prove you were stronger. An entire Wollo village can attest that you did." The boulder, which he redirected while Panthro could only hold it at bay, had earned him the Panther's insignia.

"Tygra chose to test the mind, with his illusions." And THAT had been one hell of a contest for him, on top of the icy temperatures of Hook Mountain and Mutant interference. "My test is going to be of the body. So, Panthro's going to test his will?" A nod was his answer. "How?" Cheetara explained for a few moments. "Oh." Breakfast was done in short order.

"Worried about your checkup?" he asked once the dishes had been cleared by a valet and taken to be cleaned. They sat together on the sofa, she curled up against him.

"No reason to be. I'm coming along just fine."

"I..."

"We have a day to ourselves," she began, "and it's hours before we have to leave to meet Tygra at the end of his test. Just relax."

"You're right," Lion-O said as he leaned back and pulled her down with him so that his back was against the sofa's arm and she was against his chest.

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There it is, Tygra thought as he neared the edge of the Unicorn Forest. He wrinkled his nose at the slight scent of sulphur in the air, unnoticeable to most natives of Third Earth. The presence of Thundrainium pits put out that smell (though he new the scent alone was not always an indication of one) and there was a small one in the area. Pit 2-A, he recalled. It had been marked not long after their discovery of the substance on this planet as a place to steer clear of. That said discovery had co-incided with the first arrival of Grune as a ghost seemed an ill omen to him.

It made sense that they would choose such a location. The location of the pit, they had to be hoping, would factor in psychologically. The twins were maturing, adding more subtlety to their game if this was any indication. They'd had months to plan and nearly a week to prepare.

"If those two don't know every trick in the book," he said to himself, "then they could easily write a guide to the best ones." And that, he knew, was what he was facing. The twins at their sneakiest best. The sun was still low in the east, and he had until sundown to navigate their nest of snares and tricks. He squared his shoulders and put every sense on high alert. Once he stepped into the treeline, the game was on.

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"LET US GO!" WilyKat shouted as he struggled with the ropes keeping him immobile. several coils were cinched about his torso, legs, and his arms behind his back. WilyKit sat back-to-back with him in the claustrophobic space of the array of stones piled above them in the manner of an igloo. He could feel his strength being gradually sapped. The dome of rocks blocked most of the Thundrainium, save for the small space of the entrance. Their arms and upper bodies were tied to each other's as well. Their chances of escape, it seemed, were minimal.

Merely the day before, while setting traps for Tygra's Anointment Trial, he had felt a tiny prick of pain

in the base of his neck and blackness settled in. Other images played across his mind in a haze, sounds unrecognizable before unconsciousness had draped over him again. Now, he had awoken to a (to him) recurring nightmare.

"What," the Scavenger who had captured them said, "and ruin such a golden opportunity? How about NO!"

"BASTARD!" WilyKit roared from behind. Her own struggles, along with his, seemed to make the ropes tighter.

"Keep still, or you'll cut off your circulation," the Mutant said, and then cackled madly. "I wish I had time to explain just what your role is in this grand trap. And, I thank you for setting up so many and saving me SO much time! I only had to... modify a few."

"What do you think you're gonna do?" Kat asked, hoping for any scrap of information.

"That," he said, "is for whomever is attempting the Anointment Trials to find out. I believe his name is Tygra."

"How... HOW COULD YOU KNOW THAT?!"

"Oh, word of such things gets around, and I'm good at overhearing tidbits of information and putting them together. But, I really must get going." The scrawny Jackal turned to make his way to the exit, pausing when half-way there. "By the way," he began, "you should know that you have NO chance of getting out of here. Should this Tygra survive the series of traps I've enhanced, it will only ensure your deaths."

"YOU DON'T KNOW WHERE OUR TRAPS ARE!" Kit screamed.

"Oh, in fact, I do. The drug I used to incapacitate you has another rather wonderful effect. It leaves the victims in a semi-conscious state. As such, the ability to lie is greatly reduced. You two told me everything I needed. Thank you. I mean it." With that he was gone, and both siblings shed bitter tears in spite of themselves.

"No..." Kit moaned, her struggles ceased for the moment.

Not again... Kat thought with mounting horror. "NOT AGAIN!!"

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Tygra enters a den of traps, unsuspecting what really awaits him. Panthro's group reaches the Village of Scholars. WilyKit and WilyKat struggle in the grip of what seems certain doom. What awaits them all? All this and more in the next episode of The Coming Darkness.