

ThunderCats

Bio-Booster Armor Guyver

The Coming Darkness

By Knight Writer

Episode Three: Test of a Lifetime, Part 2

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It was just another of the strange facts of life on Third Earth that, so soon after the onset of early spring, the forest was alive and thick with green. Tygra could have devoted his life to studying their adopted planet's ecosystem and merely scratch the surface of its mystery. He shook his head in short gestures, turning off the part of his mind that loved such curious puzzles. The twins would have their A-game on this day, and he could do no less if he even hoped to pass their test. His steps slowed to a crawl, despite the time limit of sundown. His eyes searched every surface, ears straining to pick up each sound. Aside from whatever traps they'd set up, he'd have to deal with them trying to mislead him.

There, just ahead and between two towering elms. The thread was barely visible, anyone could miss it if they hadn't been looking. Tygra approached it slowly, aware that not everything was what it seemed when the twins were really on a roll. Each end of the thread led into the underbrush, and Jaga only knew what trap it would...

Oh, he thought. Clever.

This wasn't the trap. It was too obvious. Tyra grabbed a handy rock, gauged the distance of a lengthy stride, and gently tossed it. The leafy carpet left over from autumn caved in, revealing a shallow pit. He smiled to himself. The twins, it seemed, were starting him off easy. Just to be sure, however, he used his claws to sever the thread. A frantic rustle sounded from above just before a log nearly as thick as the hole was wide smashed down into the hole. Tygra stared at it for a moment, not quite able to believe what he'd just seen while his heart pounded in his chest. Even for them, even in an Anointment Trial, that was just too damn far! If he died during the Trials, it was not to be at ThunderCat hands! What the hell were they thinking?! Tygra crawled further ahead, now wary to the point of paranoia. He couldn't back out without forfeitting everything, but why had they set up something like that? Tygra proceeded as fast as he dared. More than his place as the new Lord of the ThunderCats was at stake here.

Terror began to give way to rational thought as he weaved his way through the trees. The twins weren't children any more and if any ThunderCats were naturals at psychological warfare, it would be them. That whole setup, it seemed in hindsight, had been an attempt to get into his head. To make him jump at shadows. Kat and Kit were maturing, so their tactics would as well.

"They're not kittens any more," he said to himself, "and I was foolish to think otherwise. Lesson learned, you two."

Confident once more, he picked up his pace. A step, then two, then a rustle from above. Tygra backflipped away just as the cage slammed down. It was made from clear polymer... With smooth branches bound to the top bars by leather straps, their wickedly sharp ends nearly touching the earth. Tygra stared at it, nearly horrified at the sight. He commanded himself to be calm, to focus. Something wasn't right about this trap, as with the one before, and with this whole damn setup.

The material of the cage itself was made from materials they could have easily gotten from the Depot. Panthro might even have given them hints on how to shape it. The edges had planted themselves into the dirt, so it would have taken him a little while to lift it up enough to escape. But, the wooden spears... Panthro would never have allowed an addition like that, and he KNEW the twins would never have gone that far. The trap from before, in fact, was most unlike them.

This trap was modified after it had been set, he thought with mounting fear. The twins aren't my opponents here. The eerie familiarity brought up the memory of another death trap, not long ago. And of the Mutant who had set it up.

"Show yourself!" he shouted. "What have you done to them?!"

"The man recognizes good craftsmanship," the familiar voice of the Scavenger who had rigged the water trap last year taunted. The voice came from seemingly everywhere at once. Tygra had no way to locate the source through the echoes. "Long time, no see!"

"Not long enough!"

"Ooooh. GOOD comeback, there." Mocking laughter ricocheted off the myriad of trees. "Oh, those two are safe. For the moment. This Anointment Trial stuff must be serious business if you don't even have that damn whip on you!" Tygra's heart froze at that. "How did I know? They talked. Believe me, they talked. Told me about every little trap. They had good ideas but, as you can see, I've vastly improved them."

"I'll make you pay for every wound you left on them!"

"Since it was just a couple of needle pricks, that won't be much."

"Drugs? From a Mutant?"

"And why not?" the mocking, madly echoing voice of the Scavenger said. "Primor was one hard-assed son of a bitch, but he had a lot to teach if you had your eyes and ears open. Relax, I didn't torture them. It woulda been fun, don't get me wrong, but I needed information and kicking someone's balls into his throat ain't the best way to get it." Tygra remained silent. "See, Primor had this drug. I don't know the real name for it or what goes in it. Hell, I don't think HE knew! But it got results."

Sodium Pentothal, Tygra thought. If WilyKit and WilyKat had been fortunate, that had been it.

"See, it reduces a victim's ability to lie. Lying takes some mental agility if you wanna keep them all straight. This stuff, it's like a few belts of really good booze all at once but made to make lying damn near impossible. They resisted at first, but they talked in the end."

As well they would, Tygra thought, if you'd doped them.

"After the first time I saw Primor use it, I made sure to keep some handy. You never know, right?" It had to have been Sodium Pentothal, or a close derivative. "Let's cut to the chase. They're not in this forest, but their lives depend on you. If you get outta here alive by sundown, I'll tell you where to find them. Until then, I'M your opponent, and it won't be just traps. I'll be hunting you. If you die, or if the sun sets before you get out of this forest, those two are MINE to do with as I see fit."

"You won't get that chances!"

"See, that's up to you. Those two have been mine for just over a day. Whether they remain mine is ENTIRELY up to you. Isn't that what your Anointment Trials are about? The clock's ticking Tygra. Better get a move on."

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The sun had risen higher when the group had stopped for lunch within sight of the Hills of Elfshima. The hills themselves rested in the distant haze of late morning, their strange shape only just visible. The pale blue sky, without so much as a single cloud to mar its surface, seemed to meet the earth at the far horizon.

"The last time my legs tingled like this," Myrlha said, "we..."

"Myrlha," he groaned, blushing.

"You know I love to tease you," she said as they dismounted.

"Hey, not-quite-newlyweds!" Panthro called, "innocent ears!"

"Really? Where?" Sho shaded his eyes with a hand, looking comically about. Panthro and Myrlha laughed out loud, and even Mandora gave a chuckle as the cloth was spread and food put out. The four

sat, and Sho noticed Mandora was a tad closer to Panthro than his Sensei was overly comfortable with. His expression only gave a faint hint of awkwardness, though.

"How're you liking the Colony?" Myrlha asked before taking a bite of her sandwich.

"I'm getting along well," Mandora replied. Her usual brusque tone had softened of late.

"Great help in the Depot, I'll give her that," Panthro said.

"I didn't know you were an engineer!"

"I'm not, Sho," Mandora said. "Out on patrol, things don't always wait until you're at a station to break down." She gazed at him with the investigator's stare she had given him just before Lion-O and Cheetara's wedding. "Why did you do it?"

"Um, do what?" he asked after swallowing a bite of buffalo roast. The damn things were EVERYWHERE around the Colony. Remembering how mass hunting had nearly made them extinct once, Sho was glad that Torr had put some restrictions on the practice.

"Destroy the Vertis," she replied simply.

"Didn't anyone tell you?" Myrlha asked, perplexed.

"I want to hear it from him. I want to hear it for myself." There was something in those words, a need that was both naked and veiled.

"Well," Sho began, then took a sip of water from his canteen, "lots of reasons. I... I don't even know where to start. I want to say he had it coming."

"He did, all right," Panthro agreed.

"Also, I wanted to free the people he was hauling off to be sold."

"Were you ordered to?" Mandora asked.

"No, actually, I wasn't. King Lion-O didn't have to. Hell, I was the obvious choice for the mission." Sho paused to collect his thoughts. "Look, I might as well stop beating around the bush. I did it because I didn't have a choice."

"Keep going," Mandora said. She leaned forward, her eyes locked on his face.

"I tried not to kill anyone I didn't have to. If they ran, I let them. The damage I did to that ship was to get my countrymen off of it, and to keep those bastards Shiner and Lenin from doing them any further harm. Shit, in hindsight I could think up a thousand reasons why I turned that ship into junk. All I can honestly say about it, though, is that in the heat of the moment, it was the right thing to do." Mandora's face took on a contemplative expression.

"Why did you let them live?"

"Shiner, or Lenin?"

"Both."

"They didn't resist, for starters," he began. Her expression became approving at that. "Shiner, bastard that he is, didn't deserve it. He's a mercenary, that's all."

"And Lenin?"

"He deserved it. But, killing him would have made me no better than him. I don't know if that'll satisfy you, but there it is." The wide smile which appeared on her face suggested that it very much did.

"Thank you, Sho," she said with a smile and moist eyes.

"Gotten used to hearing that yet?" Myrlha asked with a smile of her own.

"I'm not sure I ever will."

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"DAMNIT!" WilyKat shouted as the ropes dug deeper with each moment of increasingly weaker struggle.

"Save your strength," his sister said. "Besides, my ropes are getting tighter, too."

"Am I hurting you?" he asked, an icy dagger of fear piercing his chest.

"A little."

"Sorry." He rested, then, fighting against the helplessness. Again, AGAIN, he was being used against his friends! When was it gonna stop!

He knew when. He knew very well.

The third shall rise from the king's own court.

Such sweet words. At that moment, they rang in his ears like bells.

"We're gonna get through this, Katcha."

Katcha. She hadn't called him that since they'd been cubs. Just as he'd once called her Kitcha. As their mother had called them so long ago across the sea of time and stars.

"Hey, um, Kit," he said, resiting his back against hers as a bubble of molten dread which wanted to turn into hate made itself known in his gut.

"What?"

"Did he... Um..."

"Did he what?"

The thought was too terrible for words, but all too plausible.

"Did that Mutant... Do... anything?" Kit was silent for several agonizing moments.

"To me." she said. "No."

"Are you sure?"

"Trust me, Bro, I'd know if he had." It could be tough to tell when his twin sister was lying, even for him at times, but he knew that she wasn't. A great sigh of relief escaped him, and a new sense of determination began to fill him. That Mutant shitheel wouldn't get the chance to lay his filthy hands on her. But, still...

"Honest?"

"For the love of crap, Bro, I WOULD KNOW if anything had happened down there!" He could not mistake the irritation in her voice.

"Sorry."

"Listen, this isn't your fault."

"We gotta save our energy. Just relax, Sis."

WilyKit leaned against him, full of doubt. She knew what he was thinking, but she had to admit that the time to bring it up was not now. The Thundrainium was working on her as well. Thankfully, the Mutant had not raped her.

Rape, she thought, shivering. She had never considered the possibility before, but found herself forced to. Safari Joe had driven the first spike of fear regarding that into her and thankfully he hadn't followed up. It was, however, a looming and ominous spectre just to her left or to her right. The certain knowledge that it WOULD happen if they stayed captives was never far from her mind. WilyKit forced it away with an effort. With escape impossible, they could only wait and hope.

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Tygra was covered in scratches from the brambles he'd had to dodge through on his trek through the forest. The Mutant hadn't been kidding about the revised traps or that he'd be hunted. Green bolts of energy would streak towards him at odd moments, and the Scavenger's laughter would never be far behind them.

I have one chance, he thought as he peered through a bush to the area ahead. He's herding me along, that much is obvious. Herding me into more traps. Therefore, to the exit? The thought appealed to him. It made sense.

THINK! he commanded himself. He knows where all the traps are, but he couldn't have altered all of them. The past traps he'd narrowly avoided had all been of the lethal kind. The spray of skunk oil mixed

with flammable fuel. The net snare which would have dropped him into a pit of spikes. The Mutant had had only one day to retrofit the traps. In revealing how long the twins had been his captives, he'd tipped his hand. Not by much, but by enough.

Tygra had an ace card, one he'd hoped to save for later. Unfortunately, he needed a physical fix on the Mutant. He crouched among a thicket of brambles, ignoring the thorns digging into his skin, as the sun rose ever higher. Barely an hour before, bolts of green phased plasma had begun to shoot through the trees. The Mutants had been as good as his word about being hunted.

The bursts of energy seemed to come mostly when he tried to find an alternate path. Tygra knew that this was an attempt to herd him along to where the modified traps were. The bursts always seemed to come from behind, to his right or left. He'd tried to circle back, but the Mutant's frequent shots with the rifle had shown he'd foreseen that tactic.

Tygra squinted at the path ahead, fingering the smooth round stone he'd found earlier. He dared not even breathe as he lightly rolled it ahead. The stone came to rest seemingly on its own just before twin halves of a polymer cage, each having been fitted with wooden spears, slammed together to form a lethal whole. Bursts of green fire seared holes in it from the left.

"You're getting better at this!" the Mutant's echoing voice called. Tygra crept forward, tuning out the voice as it described its plans for WilyKit. "Hell, I'll make her brother WATCH me do it!" he crowed. "I might even give HIM the same treatment! I'm not really into that, but since I'm stuck on this planet, why the hell NOT?! You only live once, right?!"

I have to reach the exit, he thought. If I can get there, I have a chance.

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Lion-O stood at the patio window of their quarters, staring out at the trees. Something was wrong. He couldn't shake the terrible feeling that stole over him as distant birds danced over the treetops. He gave a start as Cheetara's arms slid about his waist from behind and her head came to rest against his shoulder.

"Something's wrong," he said.

"I think so, too."

"Can't you tell what?"

"I wish I could," she replied. "When women of my clan become with cub, our sixth sense goes right out the window. Right now, all I have is from watching you." Her grip became tighter. "But, I can't help

agreeing with you."

"Let's go," he said abruptly.

"And do what? We can't interfere with the Anointment Trials. You KNOW that."

"We CAN stop anyone else from doing the same."

"I do have a bad feeling," she admitted. "I just can't shake it."

"Let's go." Lion-O said. "I just hope it's nothing."

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The sun sat at its zenith as the ThunderCycles reached the Village of Scholars. Men in black robes bustled among the narrow streets as the party passed through the gates.

"Hello, friends!" cried a boisterous voice. The large frame of Arcturus came bounding up to them. "It's been so long!"

"That's enough," another voice said. The four visitors turned to see a Bolkin striding up to them. Duncan strolled up to them with a smile on his face.

"Oh, Prime Scholar!" the human said as he scurried back.

"Duncan?" Panthro asked, bewildered. The diminutive Bolkin strode up to them, his black robes now fringed with purple.

"I must say," he began, "Things have changed quite a bit since you were last here. Who are your friends?"

"I'm Myrlha."

"Seres Mandora."

"I'm..."

"Sho Fukamachi," Duncan said, smiling up at him. "Oh, yes, I know who you are."

"I guess my reputation preceeds me," he said with a lopsided grin.

"Word of you reached us quite a while ago. I've been most eager to meet you, seeing as how you're responsible for my being Prime Scholar."

"What?!"

"We can discuss that later. Please, follow me." They walked behind Duncan along the crowded streets of the Villiage of Scholars. Sho was keenly aware of the eyes upon him, of the whispers that followed his passage. After several minutes of walking, they found themselves before a house that would not have been out of place on an ancient plantation. The front was lined with marble columns which stretched

from ground to rooftop. Ornate windows decorated its face, with double doors made of polished oak in the center. Two men, not wearing robes, bowed after pushing them open.

"Welcome home, Prime Scholar," they said in unison.

"So," Panthro began, "Wanna tell us how this happened?" The foyer gleamed, the surfaces nearly clean enough to perform surgery on. A single wide staircase led up to the balcony above. Duncan gave it not so much as a glance as he led them to a simple door set in the wall to the right.

The chamber beyond bore shelves along every wall, most filled with books. The desk in the center of the barely-organized clutter looked to be made of stained mahogany, its age easily in the triple digits.

Duncan leapt into the seat and gazed at Sho pointedly.

"I've known of your coming for a long time," he said, "but many of the details were beyond my expectations." Before Sho could ask, a knock sounded at the door. At Duncan's invitation, a steward walked in pushing a wheeled cart laden with covered dishes. "Again, more food than I can eat in one go," Duncan said, "but now I have guests to share it with!" The fare was simple, vegetable dishes and thin soups, but was pleasing to the palette all the same. Tea was served after dinner was finished, and the steward excused himself. "Even after five months as Prime Scholar," Duncan began, "I'm still not used to this level of extravagance. All I need is here in this one room, yet I have an entire manor with servants! A Bolkin, with SERVANTS!" he cried.

"Um, yeah," Sho said. "So, how do I figure into that?"

"Duncan researched legends about you," Panthro said.

"Indeed, I did. To think that they were true!" Duncan slid forward in his seat, eyeing Sho in a way the human was not overly comfortable with. "And to think that he was wrong!"

"Who?"

"Oh, silly me," Duncan said with a sigh. "There was a human I met a long time ago whose knowledge of Second Earth was without peer. He never believed in the legends surrounding the Guyver. He and I remained friends for many years. Oh, I wish I could see him again."

"I think we saw him last time we were here," Panthro said. "What was his name?"

"Agito."

Sho's jaw dropped at that name.

"Agito?" he asked, the saliva in his mouth having dried up.

"Why, yes," Duncan said, though his happy demeanor was shaken at his reaction.

"Agito Makashima..." Sho trailed off. "What has he told you?"

"Many things..."

"Damnit!"

"SHO!" Myrlha, Mandora, and Panthro shouted.

"He left a book in my care," Duncan said, visibly shaken. "He told me to give it to you."

"So, he told you about me?" Duncan could only nod as Sho left his seat. "It makes sense."

"Honey, you're scaring me," Myrlha said.

"Don't take me for a total fool, Sho," Duncan said sharply. "Given what has reached me of late, it's obvious Agito was incorrect about..."

"No," Sho said, "he was lying to you." The silence which followed his words stretched thick in the air.

"Young man," Duncan began, "I hardly think you should call someone you've never met a liar!"

"I have met him. Agito Makashima."

"How..."

"Guyver Three."

"I see," Duncan said at length. "I was right after all."

"Mind filling the rest of us in?" Mandora asked.

"Agito told me," Duncan said as he rose from his chair and walked to one of the stuffed bookshelves, "that you would come to me, Sho." He searched the stacks of volumes. "That your memory would have failed you."

"But..."

"I TOLD you I'm no fool," Duncan said as he selected a particular tome and hefted it in his arms. It was thick and bound in ancient leather. "I know you are thousands of years old, as old as the stories about you. So, how would my friend know you would come, even before your presence was known?" Duncan blew dust off of the cover. Imprinted were the Kanji characters for Sho's name. "He left this in my care, just over twenty years ago."

"Duncan..."

"He always denied knowledge of the Guyver legends," the Bolkin said. "But events of late have given lie to that. I wonder what else he told me was false?"

"You still call him a friend?" Myrlha asked as Sho accepted the tome.

"He was never anything but. Whatever secrets of Second Earth he kept from me, I don't doubt it was for a good reason."

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I have you now, Tygra thought as he crept between the mighty trees. He was scraped and bloody, having narrowly avoided yet another trap. Two of the claws on the left hand had peeled back as he'd climbed out of a slippery pit whose bottom had been lined with jagged metal. He ignored the pain, the fear, even the adrenaline and forced his mind to be calm while he sought a secure spot. The Mutant had overplayed his hand again, and Tygra fully intended to take advantage of it.

A set of steel jaws snapped closed just a second after he'd yanked his arm back. No bursts of energy followed. He remained stock still, searching for any sign of attack. When none came after several moments, he crawled forward yet again.

Getting close to sundown, he thought. If I'm gonna pull this off, I have to get started now!

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"Ah! Hello!" Maria cried as she neared the kiosk Tryphon and Fahd had selected.

"Good evening, Miss Maria," Fahd said. Tryphon busied himself with packing their belongings. "Thank you for greeting us!"

"Come on," she said, "there aren't any more buyers out, and dinner's ready!"

"When did we agree to stay with her?" Tryphon asked.

"When did you say you wanted to spend as little as possible?" Fahd retorted. "Lead on, Miss Maria."

They followed her through twisting streets and bustling people.

"That kiosk," she said, "is yours now. So long as you're in Watershed, that's where you do business. Was it good?"

"Quite good, wasn't it, Try?"

"Oh, yeah. Lotsa money."

"I'm glad. Now, come along!" Tryphon and Fahd fell in lock-step behind the Wollo as she sauntered through the crowds. Many of the other races gave her a wide berth of respect. "Here we are!" she chirped once they got to the two-story building she called home. The inside was tastefully decorated in muted wood, lit with scattered lanterns that lent a homey feel. The aroma of a merrily simmering stew set their stomachs to rumbling sharply, both spying the iron cauldron hung over a low fire. "Lisker!" she called in her brightest sing-song voice, and the two Thunderians came to a near-crashing halt.

"Did she say..." they said in unison before the human came into view from behind a door to the left.

"Fuck me," Tryphon said before he could stop himself.

"Please forgive my partner, Mister Lisker," Fahd said in his best soothing voice at the sight of Lisker and

Maria's open-mouthed stares. "His mouth sometimes runs away with him..."

"First," Lisker said with a wide smile, "I'm taken. Second, your short friend isn't even my type. That whole having-a-penis thing is a real turn-off." The tension in the air dissipated at once. "I saw you two at Fortress Plun-Darr, but I never got your names."

"I'm Fahd," he replied with an extended hand that Lisker shook. "My partner is called Tryphon. I must apologize again for..."

"Don't worry about it," Lisker said. "This is kind of a shock for me, too. Maria told me we'd have guests, but I didn't think it'd be two Thunderians." Lisker shook his head before shooting Maria a glance. "You certainly got me on this one."

"Nice," another female voice said from the right. Tryphon and Fahd turned to see a human woman clad in abbreviated furs giving the former a speculative glance. "I've heard of your kin, but have never seen one before." Tryphon swallowed with an audible click at her scrutiny.

"Me?" Neither man could tell if her eyes held curiosity or attraction, and neither was overly comfortable with it.

"I assume you are Thunderians," she said. "I can see why one of our sister tribes took a liking to your kin."

"We have mates," Fahd said hurriedly. It was even close to the truth.

"Taken," she said, "I should have known." She smiled briefly before turning to Maria. "It smells wonderful," she said to the Wollo.

"It smells ready, too," she said before dashing to the pot and stirring. "I'll set it out, why don't you all go to the table?"

"Fahd," Tryphon said as the others filed out, "What in THE hell have you landed us in?"

"I'm not sure," he mused as they followed Lisker and the unnamed human into the dining area of the house. "But, I don't think you have anything to worry about."

"Thank you," he said in a voice that carried the opposite meaning, "that sets my mind right at ease."

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Tygra crouched in the underbrush, ignoring the pain in the now-declawed fingers. The last few bursts of energy had allowed him to, AT LAST, get a fix on the Mutant. He sought the inner core of himself, that still place from which he could use his latent talents. Long ago, he remembered, those of his clan could use that ability with ease. Time and interbreeding had nearly extinguished the power, but it was still his

to command. He calmed his mind, focused on the spectral presence of the Mutant.

Jirna paused on sighting the ThuderCat in his scope. There he was, exposed and... meditating? What the hell was THAT about? The Scavenger ignored it, lining up his shot. The striped fucker had evaded each trap thus far, and looked to be in real danger of escaping the woods. That, he knew, would not do. You had a good run, he thought, but the game is mine.

A rustling reached his ears, leaves and earth being overturned. The ground broke to his right as the rotting corpse emerged. Its flesh was mottled and rose from the depths with skeletal hands clinging to it. "Why aren't you with us?" it asked, maggots tumbling from its mouth and clouded eyes staring sightlessly at him. "Join us." Other corpses rose up, each echoing that sentiment. "It's warm down here," the rotted form of a Reptillian cooed. "Your place is with us." The lizard's bloated tongue lolled from his mouth to explode in a torrent of maggots.

"Come and eat with me beautiful," a corpse shouted as it sprang up to grab his leg. "IT'S SO DARK!" "It's not real..." His voice was trembling and choked, his grip on the rifle tight enough to nearly damage it. "IT'S NOT REAL!" he bellowed and, did they fade, just a little there? The flicker was gone so fast he might have imagined it and a very familiar voice rang out behind him.

"Fall IN, soldier!" Jirna turned and his stomach revolted at the sight of Primor's crushed form somehow making his way closer in a lurching stagger. Bones jutted out from dessicated flesh, their broken ends shifting with each impossible step and a grinding sound, more horrid than even the voices of his fallen former comrades, filled his ears and drilled into his brain. Primor's head was being carried almost indifferently in the right hand, bumping against the leg with each step. Jirna's balls felt as if they'd shrunk four sizes as his finger began to jerk the trigger. Most of the shots missed, yet those that hit slowed the ghastly form of his one-time leader not a whit. "What," his head taunted, the only part of him still whole, "you thought you could kill me? I'm DEAD, we're all DEAD!" More corpses began to rise, one a Reptillian whose body rose from the dirt in halves. Left half and right half slithered together, each arm trying to hold the whole together and lurching forward with a sickeningly wet sound.

Even though it's for the sake of the twins, Tygra thought, I think I'm going to hate myself for this later. He'd never used his powers of illusion to conjure such horrific images in another's mind, not to speak of the incredible drain doing so was putting on him. The Mutant would have to break soon, or he'd be unable to help Kat and Kit due to exhaustion. The Mutant put his hands to his head after dropping the now-empty rifle. And bolted, much to Tygra's annoyance. He ceased his assault on the Mutant's mind

and gave chase, unable to dismiss a sense of foreboding.

Jirna ran as if all the demons of hell were on his heels which, in his own mind, was not far from the truth. He imagined he could still hear them, all clamoring for him to join them. He dashed through low-hanging branches and clumps of brambles without even feeling them rip at his flesh as the footsteps pounded behind them.

Why is he still running? Tygra asked himself as he dodged about the foliage the Mutant was destroying in his haste to escape illusions which were no longer being inflicted on him. Weary as he was, he missed the fact that his own pursuit was driving his enemy on ever harder.

Jirna dashed ever onward even as reality began to assert itself. The pursuing hordes were... just one set of feet? He didn't allow himself to slow as his terror waned. It had been a trick. A damn good one, to boot. Jirna allowed a small smile as he reflected on how he'd been fooled. ThunderCat powers, indeed! He didn't notice the drop-off until it was too late.

Tygra's heart caught in his throat when the Mutant seemed to vanish from sight. He slowed as he neared the drop, cursing himself for forgetting about it. He reached the edge in time to see the Mutant tumble head over heels, the sounds of snapping bones audible even from where he perched. While not steep to the point of being sheer, the angle was enough. At the base of the incline was a fallen log, and Tygra knew what would happen just seconds before it did. A snapped branch sticking up from the log impaled the Mutant just below the solar plexus.

Jirna felt the white-hot pain as his fall came to an abrupt end, and had enough presence of mind to look down at the branch which had impaled him. Blood welled up in his throat which he coughed out. ThunderCat trick... indeed... Darkness encroached his vision even as he beheld Tygra making his way down. Clever bastard, he thought as the ThunderCat's face filled his fading vision. He was, he knew, in no shape to talk. Even if those two managed to escape their bonds, they'd never escape the Thundrainium pit and he'd take the knowledge of its location to his grave. It would be some small slice of solace in whatever afterlife awaited him.

"WHERE ARE THEY?!" Tygra roared as the life in the Mutant's eyes faded. All he got in reply was a weak

chuckle before his head slumped on his chest. Tygra shook his head, forcing down the disgust at the thought that he'd used his greatest power to kill. Forced everything down to focus on saving two other lives. With the Mutant dead, his only chance was to get clear of the forest. Lion-O and Cheetara, he knew, would be waiting for him at the exit. It was his, and the twins', best chance.

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The stew, Tryphon and Fahd found, was excellent. Though neither had sampled much in the way of Wollo fare, the lack of meat didn't detract from the dish. Tryphon, Fahd noticed, had eaten nearly all of his meal though he couldn't tell if it was from comity or fear. Lisker had gone out of his way to appear non-threatening, yet it had been Fahd who'd carried on much of the conversation while Try had busied himself eating. Maria emerged into the dining room, carrying several brown bottles.

"Go easy with this stuff," she said as she set one before each person before sitting down with her own.

"I save it for special occasions." Fahd uncorked his bottle and took in the rich scent of the... beverage. It had alcohol, and it could degrease an engine, from the smell. The first sip was smooth, heavy with undertones of barley and roots. And gave him a monster buzz.

"What do you call this?" he asked. Tryphon took a sip and his eyes widened and immediately softened. Yes, indeed, this was potent stuff.

"It doesn't have a name," the human Natalie said. "Just a kick."

"One hell of a kick," Tryphon blurted, then shut his mouth with a click.

"Hey, good to see you can talk," Lisker said before taking a small pull from his bottle with a shudder.

"Trust me, drink it slow, fellas." Tryphon heeded that advice by setting the bottle down after another sip. The talk was rather light as each drained their bottle of atomic beer. His head buzzing pleasantly, Fahd led Tryphon up to the guest room Maria had prepared.

"You don't seem like yourself," Fahd said as he doffed his robe. "I thought you'd sworn off alcohol."

"And piss off Lisker?" Tryphon replied as he stripped to the waist. "We're in his house, in case that slipped your mind!" The smaller man wobbled slightly on his feet, not quite drunk but a goodly way towards it. "Only one bed," he said on looking at the large sleeping surface, his voice a mix of dreamy and alarmed. Fahd shook himself inside, refusing to think about Tryphon that way. They'd had limited intimacy since having been freed, but never more than the smaller man was comfortable with. They didn't even share rooms in the living spaces above their shop.

Way to put your foot in it, Fahd, he cursed to himself. Forced not only to share lodgings, but a bed and

both of them with the most potent beer in all creation coursing through their veins.

"I'll take the floor," he said, already rolling his robe up for a pillow.

"It's big enough for us both," Tryphon said in that same voice. "Just so long as you don't get any ideas."

"Of course not," Fahd returned without allowing his relief to show as he eased beneath the covers. As the last daylight began to fade, Tryphon slid into the bed and spooned up next to him. The alcohol took over for them, promptly knocking both of them out until morning.

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"There you are!" Lion-O shouted as a severely battered Tygra emerged from the fringe of the Unicorn Forest. The man was covered in wounds and bruises... and were a couple of his claws missing?!

"How rough WERE they in there?!" Cheetara demanded, confused and outraged. Tygra made the last few feet in a stumble, his chest heaving.

"Not them..." he said between gulps of air. "Captured..." Lion-O shared a worried look with Cheetara before locking eyes firmly on Tygra again. "Mutant... got them..."

"THAT one," Cheetara snarled. "Where is he?"

"Dead..." Lion-O noted the wince of shame on Tygra's face. "He..." Tygra's breathing became gradually steadier, his words clearer. "He caught them, drugged them into telling him about the Anointment Trial."

"And altered the traps," Lion-O finished. "Did he tell you where they are?"

"No, he... he died before he could tell me."

"The thundrainium pit nearby?" Cheetara mused. "If so..." she trailed off, looking at Lion-O with a worried expression. He reached to his hip out of habit, only to find the Sword of Omens absent and cursed himself for not carrying it along.

"We have to be certain," he said as a strange energy grew within him. A certainty came with it of what he should, and could, do. He didn't question it as he raised his sword hand to the sky, and the energy built. "SWORD OF OMENS!" he shouted, "COME TO MY HAND! I, LION-O, KING OF THUNDERA, COMMAND IT!" His voice boomed into the open air as loud and clear as if he were wearing another amplifier patch on his throat and the power burst forth, invisible and covering his skin in an electric tingle.

=====

In the still and silent Sword Chamber, the Eye of Thundera emitted its growl and light, filling the shadowed space about the stand on which it rested with brilliant crimson. The light pulsed with the beating of its bearer's heart and the growl crested into a mighty roar. The Sword, its conduit, became a golden light in the center of a sea of fire that coalesced into a golden radiance which streaked through the walls of the Chamber, of Cat's Lair, into the waning day and toward the one who had called it.

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The Sword of Omens appeared in his hand from a streak of blinding light and the power reached a crescendo, but not its peak, Lion-O knew. He brought the Eye to his own and peered through the crossbars.

"SWORD OF OMENS! GIVE ME SIGHT BEYOND SIGHT!"

=====

"What in the..." Lion-O began as he beheld the scene before him. He felt detached, ghost-like as he turned about. The Eye's second sight had never done anything like this! Deep within, he understood what this was. The Eye wasn't just showing him where WilyKit and WilyKat were being held, it had taken him there in some strange way. He saw everything in grayscale, silent and unmoving. The only thing moving at all in this strange snapshot, he realized, was him.

The power awakening within him guided his steps, his actions. The Eye was communicating with him on a level it never had before, and Lion-O couldn't help but feel a trace of fear that the power immediately quashed. Was THIS the power of his bloodline? What kings before him could call upon the Eye this way? He knew to take it up with Jagara, and that she would FINALLY be able to give him some answers.

A bridge reached from the jagged stone ringing the pit to the island in the center. A dome-like structure sat in its middle, and he felt WilyKit and WilyKat within it. Their life pulses were weaker, but still there. He set foot on the bridge when it seized his attention and called out several places.

Mines, he thought. That Mutant rigged this thing to explode! It all made sense in this weird stretch of time. Lion-O could see all the planted explosives, could deduce their intent to spill them all into the molten thundrainium below. He didn't feel the effects as he strode across it to the small dome. He ducked into the entrance to see the twins bound back-to-back and visibly weak. Lion-O touched one of

the stones which comprised their dwelling and new information swarmed him. Most of the rocks were chock full of lead ore, which was blocking the worst of the thundrainium.

"Damn," he muttered after passing through the stones. The twins sat bound to each other, and both looking weak. He felt a tremendous pull and had no choice but to follow it...

Back to the grasslands. He took a minute to re-orient himself. Cheetara and Tygra were staring openly at him. "No time to talk!" he barked before leaping into the ThunderTank! "We have to MOVE!" Tygra and Cheetara joined him before he sent the ThunderTank roaring toward the location of the pit.

=====

The sun bled from the sky as WilyKat's flagging reserves of strength came dangerously close to emptying. He still sat tied to his sister, neither of them able to escape the ropes.

"Sis," he said weakly.

"What?"

"We'll get outta this," he said, rather than tell her that he loved her. "We will."

"I know," she said from far away.

I want the power, he thought. Guyver...

The third shall rise from the king's own court.

"Why are we stopping here?" Cheetara asked as he brought the ThunderTank to the edge of the pit. He could feel the Thundrainium weakening him as he breathed in air that tasted of sulfur, but he knew he was right. She stayed in the tank, arms unconsciously wrapped about her abdomen. Tygra only looked up at him with a quizzical expression.

"I know what I'm doing," he said before raising the Sword to the sky.

"What happened to him?" Tygra whispered from the rear section of the tank.

"I have no idea," she said in awe as the light burst from the blade.

Lion-O thrust the blade skyward, foregoing the traditional build-up. "THUNDERCATS! HO!" The crimson light burst forth, blasting the igloo of lead-rich stones into nothingness. Several puffs of dust and smoe arose from the bridge as the beam passed over them.

WilyKat felt the strength return to him as soon as the red light washed over him. The ropes vanished into puffs of smoke just before he and his sister regained their feet. Their strength returned as the

crimson glow bathed them, blocking out the effects of the thundrainium.

"Kat! Kit!" Lion-O's voice said. "Follow my voice!"

"What in the..." Kit began.

"You heard the man!" Their strength growing with each second, they followed the path of the Eye's light to emerge before Lion-O. Cheetara and Tygra leapt from the ThunderTank to rush over to them. WilyKat got one look at Tygra and felt the shame return. The effects of the pit returned, yet were muted due to the amount of lead ore which tended to ring such awful places.

"Thank Jaga you two are safe," Tygra said.

"We should be telling YOU that!" WilyKit exclaimed. "What did he DO?!"

"Later for that," Cheetara said. "Let's leave this hateful place."

"Here," Kat said, hiding his true feelings as he removed his insignia. "You HAD to have gotten out before sundown if you're here now." Kit followed suit, both offering the injured man's reward. Tygra accepted them before they joined the collection about his waist.

"Thank you," he said.

=====

Night had fallen before their return. Tygra and the twins were safely in the Medical Wing. The former would be allowed to heal before facing his next trial. The latter two again showed no signs of thundrainium poisoning. It struck Lion-O with a strange sense of Deja Vu. He stood on the observational platform atop the Lair's head, staring up at the stars. So many questions regarding the new level of power displayed by the Eye haunted him despite Jagara's promise of an explanation in the morning. Cheetara was in their quarters, fast asleep. Even Jaga did not appear to offer guidance.

"I was told of today's events," Claudis said as he stepped onto the platform. Lion-O remained silent as his father drew up beside him. "It's every father's dream to see his son exceed him."

"None of that ever happened for you?"

"Nothing even remotely similar," he replied. "Whatever your connection with the Eye is, mine would never have matched it. Of course," he went on, "I never had cause to use it as much as you had to. That might have something to do with it. Or not."

"Father?"

"Son," he said, placing a hand on his shoulder, "the only ones who truly know the secrets of the Sword and the Eye are our ancient ancestors. Of which Jagara is one."

"Why is only her name known, then?"

"The trouble with history is that it's written in the past. We have to take the word of people who lived long ago, whose words have been folded and spindled by generations of re-telling. Just as our own times will suffer such a fate for our people in the far-off future. The only record, TRUE record, is the Book of Omens."

"You've read it, Father?"

"The parts it allowed me to read. I know that's confusing, but the Book is perhaps the most confusing artifact of our past. Not even Jaga was able to fully plumb its secrets. The wisest of us all, he merely scratched the surface."

"Shit."

"Son..."

"'Whiskers' just doesn't seem to cut it here."

"True." The strange moment of levity passed. "That human boy will play a large role in things to come."

"I know. Not all of our people are happy with him being here."

"Not all of them are happy with the locals living here. The one thing we need to forget is our traditional Us-Them mentality. It served us well on Thundera, but it won't on Third Earth. I heard a replay of your first speech. Very well done, especially about how they lived here before we did."

"It's true..."

"I know. Son, you're doing the best you can by our kin, and the locals. The people love and trust you. Not all of them will, though."

"So, what do I do?"

"Perhaps I should let Jagara tell you what she needs to before I offer my opinion."