

I, Kowalski

By Nine Tiger

"See Spot run. Run Spot. Run," I intoned. Only six words. Well, three, if you count the type of words, and not the total number of words. The old code truly taxes this penguin brain, I thought ruefully. I turned off the digital recorder, too tired to continue with the complex task of translating the thin tome, *Fun with Dick and Jane*, that had fallen into our enclosure.

Thunder crashed. It was a cold and wet spring night, no fun for anyone at the Central Park Zoo. I gazed around our concrete habitat. Skipper, Rico and Private all slept peacefully in their square-cut bunks, but I was restless with scientific urgency. I tapped my flipper against my cranium. Perhaps a little tweaking of the electronics, and maybe I will get further in my explorations of electricity, I considered. "Now where is that oil?" I murmured as I rooted around our somewhat drafty home. I set my flipper on the two metal plates, key to my apparatus, in consternation. Had Rico taken the bottle of oil for safe keeping or to add to the Thai takeout he favored?

Another thunderclap shook the habitat. "Jeez Louise!" I exclaimed as the door to our chamber blew open. There was a blinding flash of light before complete darkness engulfed me.

The stone floor was really cold, but then again, that was fine for a penguin, I thought, still prone. However, my brain tried to make sense of the bizarre image that coalesced before my eyes. A hugely vaulted chamber was lit by a great bubbling pool that stank of sewage of the worst kind. Four monstrous statues guarded the foul waters. "This isn't our habitat!" I shouted, jumping to my feet, my arms flexed in a karate pose, ready for battle of any kind. "Our pool has the delicate perfume of fish!"

"Quiet, you fool," hissed a rich baritone. "If you wake Mumm-Ra, we will both be dead."

I flipped around, and launched myself at the speaker. The strange creature easily sidestepped my attack. He must be a black belt at least, I thought before wonder captivated me, and sent me screeching to a halt in amazement.

This was a great striped cat that walked on two strong legs, not four. But where in heavens name was his tail, and why did his face bear a disturbingly human stamp. His muscles rippled under his orange, black and white fur, which only stressed a feature whose amplitude would be the

envy of any male mammal. "What nightmare of genetics is this!" I shrieked in desperation, wishing I had my teammates with me, their names dancing in my mind: Skipper! Rico! Private! Before I could make another sound, the tiger man scooped me up in his arms, his clawed hand locking my beak shut.

It was the sound of rock against rock. The lid of a sarcophagus, positioned under a fearsome skull, slowly, ever so slowly, opened. We slunk deeper into the shadows, the hammering of both our hearts like some demented conga beat of an overwrought Ricky Ricardo. Lucy, I am not home, I thought with growing despair. Oh, for a bazooka bellowed forth by the very capacious Rico!

The thing from within the tomb lurched forward, its red eyes as disgusting as any diseased sardine's, its rotten bandages flying about its form like dirty laundry on the line. This was the Mummy come to life, diabolical and grotesque! It passed its thin arms over the waters, then chuckled. "So, another temporal storm. Maybe I shall receive a gift tonight. Someone to torture in my spare time."

My gut grumbled. Now is not the time to think of food! I fumed to myself, as the tiger man gripped me so tightly that I thought my too early lunch would be returned to its sender.

The Mummy whipped around, his leering mouth widening into a Joker grin. He threw his arms upward, and spoke cursed words that were never uttered in the Bronx, although they might have been given the borough's tough reputation. Vomitous green light flooded the chamber, and exposed us to this monster.

The tiger man dropped me, then vaulted in front of me. "Keep back!" he ordered. He suddenly brandished a bolo whip, where he pulled it from a genuine mystery. Beyond reason he ran straight toward the Mummy, then jumped, cracking his whip violently. Red glowing spheres flew from the lash and bounced off the Mummy like bottle flies darting about the city dump.

This was not good. He had bravado and courage, but clearly no plan other than survival, and perhaps the notion of inflicting maximum damage on an opponent that seemed to be impervious to the defenses of his whip. Oh, for a roller skate and a gas bomb! Then I could be useful. But Rico was not here. Nor was the steady influence of Skipper, or the youth of Private to allay my fear of an untimely death.

My eyes flashed about the chamber looking for suitable material to use as a weapon. Clouds of dust began to rise as the chamber bore the brunt of the battle waged. The odd smell of petroliferous limestone above and sulfur and methane near the cauldron! If I could only get part of the ceiling to fall! The level of dust could reach a critical level. Then, a spark from the tiger man's whip could cause an explosion that might slow the monster down, or blow a hole into the chamber for our escape.

"Tiger Man! The ceiling!" I said pointing.

The Mummy laughed. "What weak new denizen of Third Earth is this!"

"No denizen, Mumm-Ra, but a highly intelligent, flightless bird called a penguin," the tiger man said with a fierce grin. His dark amber eyes showed that he knew. He was at least as intelligent as I, a marvel in a mammal.

While the Mummy gloated, the tiger man made a prodigious leap, his utilization of the whip slicing a chunk of ceiling loose. It plunged downward, and split into two on the lip of the cauldron. The tiger man landed on the edge of the malodorous pool away from the sparkling dust cloud. Whatever was in the pool began to react violently to the limestone that had fallen in, an unexpected bonus.

The tiger man smiled at me. Limestone, methane, and sulfur with a dash of the unknown. Not a rock band, but a deadly combination. One more crack of the whip, and I would be seeing him on the other side. I saluted, giving him the signal to proceed.

I thought then of Doris the dolphin. Never again would I hear her fanciful clicks and whistles, or watch her gay antics at the aquarium. No more Coney Island cotton candy too. Goodbye Skipper, Private and Rico, I thought as the deafening explosion engulfed me.

But then I learned that a penguin could fly, given the right circumstances and an assist from a capable friend. Together we shot through the surprisingly open top of the pyramid, protected somehow by the blue glowing whip wrapped around both of us.

The descent was more exhilarating than the first drop of that venerable roller coaster, the Cyclone, surpassing 85 feet at 53 degrees and logging far more than 60 miles per hour. Then, it all went black again.

The voices in the darkness were conversing in a language partial to growls and murmurs, with the occasional guttural f, k and g. It occurred to me then that I was not dead. I opened my eyes to a clear, starry night, but also to the concerned stares of several more cat people, and an oddly deformed rabbit that whined the occasional, "Snarf!"

I sat up, the wise words of Skipper almost on my lips: *Cute and Cuddly, Boys. Cute and Cuddly.*

"Hello," I said timorously, as I brushed the dust from my feathers. I raised a flipper in greeting. "I am Kowalski."

The shapely, spotted female smiled, and for a moment, my heart melted into a puddle of Silly Putty. The tiger man, hands on his hips, his fur still coated with debris too, nodded, and said, "I am Tygra. These are the Thundercats. Welcome to Third Earth, Ko'wal'ski."

The cheetah woman threw him a blanket to shield his charms. I definitely was not in Manhattan anymore.

Of the time I spent at Cats' Lair, much could be written. Adventures abounded as that fractious Mummy and his Mutant allies never let up on their attacks upon the people of Third Earth. But under the tutelage of Tygra, I earned my flashy medallion. Even the old code would never again defeat me, as my striped friend taught me well.

Still, I missed my other teammates, who had, most likely, long ago, stopped worrying about me. I imagined they held a funeral. Skipper would have procured a rose festooned, horse-shoe wreath with my name emblazoned in gold on a white banner, which the others in the zoo would look upon in envy, while delivering pithy eulogies. I could count on him for that. Rico would have provided the firecrackers. Private would have sung my favorite tune. I could hear his sweet tenor even now. "*Her name was Lola. She was a showgirl....*" I softly sang.

"Checkmate."

I looked at the chess board. I had let my attention drift. Tygra had finally gotten the best of me in the one game in which I excelled. A cloud ominously crossed the board. The steps of Cats' Lair would soon be wet with rain.

I raised my flippers in defeat. "Well, done, Grasshopper," I said with a grin.

Tygra laughed. The wind inexplicably rose. Thunder crashed. Everything went annoyingly black again.

"Kowalski! Report!"

"Has Mumm-Ra attacked!" I shouted.

The eyes that held my bewildered gaze this time belonged to my teammates. "Private!" Skipper barked. "Sardines, pronto." The plump youth saluted and made for the refrigerator.

I put a flipper to my aching head, a rolodex of images flickering through, and vaporizing like moths hitting a bug light.

"Rico! Aspirin!" Skipper commanded. Always count on the big guy, I thought, as Rico regurgitated a vial of cherry flavor chewables.

Skipper narrowed his eyes. He went to a footlocker sealed with a combination only he knew. He pulled out a silver flask shaped like a mackerel. "Take a hit, Kowalski, to clear that fogged brain of yours."

I was touched. Skipper broke out the guava juice only for emergencies. "Thank you, Skipper. I believe I will imbibe," I said, taking a hit of both aspirin and juice.

I attempted to stand, but wobbled like Skipper's old flame. The gang lead me to a wicker chair we had snatched from King Julian on our last raid. The egomaniacal ringtail still had not noticed that it was missing. But when was that last raid? I thought with despair. What day is it? What year is it?

"Did no one ever tell you not to toy with electricity in a thunderstorm, Kowalski?"

"Double negative, Skipper," I said instinctively, my internal calendar still disrupted.

"No more with the Benjamin Franklin, my friend." Skipper handed me the paper plate of sardines. "Now, build up your strength."

"A little telly will help relax you," Private chirped as I nibbled the tasty fish.

The voices that rang out from the box made me fly out of the chair, the remaining sardines hurtling about the room. "Thundercats! Ho!" I chimed in enthusiastically.

"Didn't know you were a fan, Kowalski," Skipper murmured suspiciously.

"Skipper, you have no idea! They are...." What? Characters in a television show that I might have caught unawares that had infiltrated my consciousness? I dropped back onto the chair. Private slipped an ottoman under my feet. Was it all truly a fried penguin dream? I now wondered with dismay.

Skipper turned off the television. He covered me with a blanket, a little number patterned with tiny blue dolphins for which I had a particular fondness. "Sleep, Kowalski. Sleep."

"But, Skipper--"

"That's an order, not a request, Einstein." He spun around. "And that's enough excitement for one night for all of us. To bed everyone!" He flicked a switch by the wall. All the lights went out except for my eclipse nightlight. Skipper patted the top of my head. "Time to give that brain a rest. We will figure it out in the morning, Kowalski."

It took no time for my teammates to drift back off to slumber land in their concrete bunks, while I glumly studied my own shadow on the drab wall of our habitat. My heart sank with sadness at the fleeting nature of dreams and possibilities. Tomorrow would be just another day at the Central Park Zoo, granted usually exciting, but known and familiar, even in the midst of chaos.

"Buck up, Kowalski!" I scolded myself as I settled under the blanket. As my eyes finally grew heavy with sleep, I noted the red letters of the old code in the far corner of our enclave. "'No Exit' indeed," I said to myself with a chuckle. "Zookeeper Alice would really get her khaki's in a knot if she only knew about--"

I flung my blanket aside and leapt to my feet. "This Side Up! Billy Bass! Starbucks!" I could decipher every word of the old code decorating the habitat if I chose. "By the Eye! It was all true!"

"Kowalski! Pipe down! You're dreaming again. Or does Rico need to cough up something stronger."

"Right you are, Skipper," I answered breathlessly. "Right you are. No need for alarm." Or the knockout juice, I thought warily.

I padded over to my work bench, and lifted my dry-erase board. With a few quick strokes of my blue marker, the Thundercat symbol emerged. I wrote my name under it, and sighed with the remembrance of all that I had learned, and lost. Wishes do come true, and we never really expect what we get, even if we have most fervently asked for it.

At least I could keep my literacy secret for awhile. The element of surprise might be useful. As I slowly erased the symbol, I murmured gratefully, "Thundercats! Ho!"