

Chapter 15 of *Signal in the Sky*

Whatever

By Purrsia Kat

While Felina stayed up into the late hours of the morning discovering her parents' history from letters in a box, Castle Plundarr was abuzz with activity. Vultureman rubbed his beak impatiently. Slithe had been ranting and raving for nearly an hour. What's worse was the reptile pulled Vultureman away from his work in the lab where he had started taking apart that ThunderBrat's space board. Besides, this was all drivel *he* certainly didn't need to hear. It was not *his* fault Lion-O escaped from their ambush. In fact, if they had done things the way Vultureman would have, they'd have brought Lion-O's sorry carcass back on a spear instead of a useless female snarf.

He sat stiffly at the war room table, his beady eyes focused on Jackalman sitting at the opposite end; the dog looked ridiculous with all manner of wire and steal holding his jaw together. Even through that makeshift contraption, Vultureman could tell Jackalman was as bored as the rest of them. Slithe paced back and forth, rambling on about how Panthro escaped and Grune was giving him all amounts of grief for it. Vultureman stiffened to prevent himself from groaning out loud. Why! Why did he have to be there with these morons? If that stupid assistant he had back on Plundarr hadn't messed with the important project that had been commissioned by Ratilla himself, it never would have malfunctioned and Vultureman would have been exalted instead of being assigned to this command. He was doomed. Doomed to be stuck on this forsaken rock called Third Earth with pitiful buffoons that didn't understand nor appreciate his gift of genius.

"Vultureman!" Slithe bellowed. "Stop your daydreaming!"

Vultureman cawed loudly as a reflex. "I wasn't daydreaming, Slithe," he lied.

"Hoo, then what did he just say?" Monkian asked with a lopsided smirk.

Vultureman stared daggers at the simian. "He was talking about how you have shit for brains."

Slithe picked up the nearest object, which happened to be Vultureman's compact version of the Thundrainium canon, and heaved it across the room, effectively shattering it. The ruckus from the impact sent Jackalman straight up out of his seat. He howled half in surprise, half in pain. "You imbeciles!" Slithe raged.

Vultureman stared at the destroyed device, his beak agape and his eyes wide. "*We're* imbeciles?" the bird shrieked. "Do you know how long it took me to build that canon? The next thing I'm building is a time machine so I can go back in time and shoot you as you emerge from your mother's womb!"

"That's the *only* way you could get the best of me," Slithe rumbled before swishing his tail at the enraged bird, knocking him painfully to the floor.

Vultureman scrambled to his feet, swiping up a chunk of the destroyed canon and lobbing it at Slithe's head. "I don't have to take this," he cried while making a swift exit. He heard the crashing sounds of Slithe tearing apart the war room in a fit of rage as he made haste back to his lab. His eyes burning with anger, he slammed the door to his lab. Ungrateful idiots....every one

of them!

He nearly blew his top, however, when he laid eyes on the scene before him. “You little bastard!” he shrieked. Before the boy could react, Vultureman was upon Jax. Vultureman grabbed the boy roughly by the scruff of the neck, uncaring when he cried out in pain. He may be a mere child, but no one messes with the things in Vultureman’s lab. Bringing Jax to his eye level, Vultureman glared at him and dug his nails into the flesh of Jax’s neck. “I know just what to do with you,” he told the squirming jackal.



Jax was shaking as they neared the Desert of Sinking Sands in Vultureman’s flying machine. The pale glow of sunrise did little to calm Jax. Vultureman steered the ship sharply to the right and down, and Jax gulped as he spied the silhouette of the Black Pyramid below. “It’s true,” Vultureman cawed, glaring back at the boy. “Mumm-Ra’s Pyramid...it stands.”

Jax couldn’t take his eyes off the ominous pyramid long enough to spare a glance in Vultureman’s direction. He whimpered softly and hunkered down, too scared to wonder why Vultureman was taking him here. Jax winced as the flying vessel landed roughly in the desert sands, coughing and choking slightly on the dust and sand that was kicked up by the landing. Vultureman plucked the boy effortlessly from where he was huddled in the backseat of the flying machine and carried him toward the pyramid. Jax didn’t dare struggle, fearing more painful clawing -- or worse -- courtesy of Vultureman. He lay there, limp and tucked under Vultureman’s arm.

“Mumm-Ra!” The avian squawked, “open up you wretched pile of bones!” When there was no response, Vultureman sighed heavily. While looking around for a way inside, a stone panel in the pyramid slid open.

“Enter,” Mumm-Ra’s ancient voice bade, sounding more haggard than usual.

Vultureman let out a slight chuckle of satisfaction as he entered the pyramid. Jax only looked up once while being carried through the dark corridor leading to Mumm-Ra’s chambers. The sight of a grotesquely huge spider hanging amid the scads of webs that crisscrossed the passageway was enough to prompt Jax to keep his head down and eyes tightly closed for the rest of the journey.

His eyes flew open when Vultureman carelessly dropped him to the ground before the bubbling cauldron. Jax looked around wildly and whimpered at his intimidating surroundings.

“What is the meaning of this, Vultureman?” Mumm-Ra croaked.

Jax recognized the voice as the same that bade them enter. His eyes widened in fear, even though Mumm-Ra stood hunched and mostly hidden in his red cloak, on the opposite side of the cauldron. Jax’s eyes bulged when he caught a glimpse of Mumm-Ra’s sunken eyes glowing red beneath the hood of the cloak. The boy let out a frightened yelp.

“This *brat*,” Vultureman began with obvious contempt, “needs to learn a lesson. Among other things, he is responsible for giving the ThunderCats back the Sword of Omens when we had it in our clutches.”

Mumm-Ra scoffed, a partial demented grin visible in the shadows of his cloak. “What do you

expect *me* to do about it, fool? Why don't you just kill him and be done with it?"

Jax gasped from where he sat on the ground, looking desperately from Vultureman to Mumm-Ra and back again. He winced when Vultureman emitted a shrill caw. Jax hated the grating sound of the caws with which Vultureman so often punctuated his speech.

"Personally, I don't think he's worth dulling a blade upon," Vultureman replied. "I just want him out of my feathers. I'll make it worth your while to help me do just that," he added coyly.

"I see," Mumm-Ra muttered. Jax sighed in relief when the mummy creature turned and began to amble back to his crypt.

Vultureman, furious, stepped in front of Jax and toward the departing Mumm-Ra. "What are you doing, Mumm-Ra? I thought we could make a deal!"

Mumm-Ra glanced back, his eyes glowing briefly. "You have nothing I'm interested in, Mutant. The kid is your problem. Now leave my Pyramid."

Vultureman cawed mockingly. Jax crept to his feet and began backing away from Vultureman, not liking at all where he sensed this confrontation was going. "Admit it, bone bag. You're too weak to take care of a mere boy. Pathetic!"

"What?!" Mumm-Ra raged as he whirled around. "Insolent bird!" Mumm-Ra unleashed two jagged bolts of fiery red energy in Vultureman's direction. To Jax's surprise, the nimble bird leapt out of harm's way just in time. Unfortunately, that left Jax in the line of fire and not enough time to do anything about it.



Following a hearty breakfast, WilyKit and WilyKat scampered into the Lair's hangar, where Panthro was working on a new vehicle he began building the night before. In fact, he hadn't gone to bed at all. Though he wouldn't admit it to anyone else, the major reason for avoiding sleep was not so much ambition as the fear of the nightmares he knew would follow his experience in Castle Plundarr's dungeon. And those bats. Those blasted bats. He shuddered just thinking about it. Those unpleasant thoughts vanished however, as the scaffolding he was on wobbled thanks to the kittens rough housing around it.

"Hey," Panthro called down to them. "Watch it, will you?"

"Sorry, Panthro," WilyKat replied. "We were just wondering what you're making and--"

"--if you're gonna rebuild us a space board," Kit finished for him, with a measure of sheepishness.

Panthro chuckled. "This takes priority, kids," he explained, motioning to the skeleton of a ship that was under construction. "And this is going to be a flying ship. Maybe even space worthy if I can come up with a hyperspace megacondensor for it."

The kittens exchanged a wide-eyed glance. "Wow, that's neat!" Kit finally declared.

"But what's a, uh, megaconden-- , m-mega--thing anyway?" Kat asked.

"It's something the ship will need to travel in outer space, by giving the jets enough boost to break out of Third Earth's force of gravity. Without it, it'll simply be restricted to flying within Third Earth's atmosphere."

"Hey, maybe if we can fly in space we can locate other Thunderian survivors," Kit mused.

“Do you really think there are any?” wondered her brother.

Panthro shrugged. “Don’t see how we can rule it out. True all the ships in our fleet were destroyed by the Mutants, but there were many fleets that left before us which were quite a way ahead of us. Maybe they got lucky and missed an encounter with the Mutants.”

WilyKit and WilyKat beamed at the idea of surviving countrymen. “Well, we were on our way outside and thought we’d see--”

“--how you were doing and stuff,” Kat finished.

As the cat’s paw raised to let the kittens out, Panthro shook his head and smiled. “Alright, then. But no riding two to one board,” he reminded them concerning their remaining space board.

“Aw, gee, Panthro,” WilyKit lamented. “We’re not that heavy and--”

“Kit!” WilyKat exclaimed as he jostled her shoulder, “look at that!”

She squinted due to the brisk breeze blowing into the hangar and gazed into the eastern horizon where Kat was pointing. In the morning skies over of the Desert of Sinking Sands, there was a brilliant flash followed by a point of light, almost like a star, streaking through the atmosphere and into outer space.

“That was like some kind of weird shooting star,” Kat commented.

“‘Cept it was going the wrong way to be a shooting star. Weird,” WilyKit concurred.



“Jax, wake up,” came a seemingly distant yet familiar voice. He remained unaware that he was being shaken. “Baby, wake up.” Though his eyes flickered open briefly, Jax failed to focus on the woman crouched over him.

“Leave him alone, Aurea. That damn kid is a weakling and an embarrassment anyway. I’m surprised he lasted out on his own this long,” scoffed a male, whose voice was likewise familiar to Jax’s semiconscious mind. Frighteningly familiar.

“Adustus! How dare you say that about your own son!”

“Some son. I’ve had pets less worthless than he is,” the man growled.

Jax, his mind still feeling jumbled and numb, could swear those were the voices of his parents. But how could it be? His parents were far away and he was on that strange planet with the other Mutants, the ‘Cats and the Mummy...wasn’t he?

“Jax, baby, wake up,” his mother pleaded once again. He wrinkled his muzzle out of reaction to the strong scent of alcohol on her breath. Blinking his eyes open once more, he finally focused on his frazzled looking mother.

“Mama?” he croaked. He didn’t dare scan the area for his father, for fear the mere act of making eye contact would spur a beating. However, he did catch the gleam from the light reflecting off his father’s military decorations on his uniform, so there was no mistaking his presence. His brow wrinkled in confusion. Maybe the mummy hit him with the magic fire and he was dead. Maybe this was what it was like to be dead. Did that mean his parents were dead too? “Where’m I?”

His mother’s reply came back in a soothing tone, but with the words slightly slurred. “You’re

home now. The military police found you in the middle of the road in town. What in the name of Plundarr were you doing there?"

Jax blinked several times. "H-home? No, wait. There were cats and a big cat fortress and a mummy and some mutants, one a vulture one, and a big cat with one big tooth and--"

"Slow down, hon. I can't hardly follow you."

"Wouldn't matter, you stinkin' drunk," Adustus raged, "you're too wasted most of the time to follow or be of use to anything. And *you*," he growled, his focus now on Jax. "What the hell possessed you to run away? Don't say the beatin's because you only get what you deserve. If you knew how to act like you have two wits about you, I wouldn't have to get rough on you. Guess I'm going to have to whip on you again until you shape up. I've got enough to worry about around here between that missing Mutant fleet and your drunkard of a mother."

Adustus raised his arm to backhand the boy where he lay beside his mother. His stinging blow was averted by Aurea, who rose to her feet and began shoving her mate. "Don't you hit that boy after he just came back to us!"

"Stay out of it, bitch," he bellowed back while striking her hard across the muzzle.

While his parents fought, Jax slunk off the chair he'd been stretched across, and crawled to his room. He curled up in the farthest, darkest corner, covered his ears against the din of their arguing, and sobbed. Now he wondered if what happened on Third Earth was just a dream he had while cold and alone on the streets of Plundarr. Maybe the cats that were so nice to him never even existed. Maybe.

*He lives in his imagination, with those friends of his very own
He doesn't get along with the outside world, he'd rather be alone
Sometimes, when it's late at night, he starts to wonder why
(The plans he made can never happen, so all he does is cry).*

*His parents, they can't understand why their son, he turned out wrong
He runs away from all the pain and forgets them when he's gone
He'd rather be all by himself because his plans, they seem the best.
He finally gets the nerve one day and now life becomes a test.*

Whatever you want, whatever you do, wherever you go, whatever you say

*Mom and Dad, I'm sorry
Mom and Dad, don't worry
I'm not the son you wanted, but what did you expect?
I've made my world of happiness to combat your neglect.*

---Whatever, Husker Du