

Deliver Us From the Elements

By Purrsia Kat

Felina left the dining hall after finishing a scant breakfast. She'd of course grown used to the spare meals Snarf was forced to prepare. The winter had indeed been a hard one and the ThunderCats were not spared the impact of the crop failure brought on by the early frost. Hunting was even a challenge, as the creatures of nature also felt the sting of the famine and became increasingly scarce. Making her way down the hall to the control room, she stepped aside as the boisterous Thunderkittens bounded past. They certainly had energy to spare. Then again, Snarf insisted the kids, as well as the now very pregnant Cheetara, get the best of whatever food that was scrounged up. And Felina couldn't argue with that. The only saving grace was their enemies apparently suffered equally and had caused little grief in recent months. And now the first warm days of spring were here. Hopefully, they'd soon be thriving again just like the brown grass comes back to life from beneath the receding snow drifts.

She reached the control room to find the kittens already there, and Tygra and Panthro poring over data and charts. The monitor showed sheets of gray rain falling across the countryside, which had been the dreary view for days now. "Still raining, I see."

Tygra nodded without looking up from the chart he held. "There seems to be no sign of it letting up." Finally, he looked upon the lioness. "To make matters worse, there's another front moving in, bringing more rain and storms. I think we need to start worrying about flooding. The earth is already saturated as it is, what with the constant rain and the melting snow..."

Panthro grunted his agreement. "Robear Bill already called in, asking for our help in putting out sandbags around their village. The river of Despair will likely crest to flood stage tonight. I was going to see if either of you wanted to come along."

"Yeah!" WilyKat exclaimed. "We're tired of--"

"Being cooped up in the Lair," Kit finished.

"I was talking more to Felina and Lion-O than you two," Panthro chuckled. "And lifting sand bags in the rain isn't exactly *fun*."

Felina did a double-take at the mention of Lion-O, and turned to see that he had indeed entered the room; and quite stealthy at that. One had to really study his physique to notice the signs of the famine on him. His face was slimmer, and dark circles under his eyes gave them a slightly sunken look. But otherwise, he looked as fit as ever.

Lion-O took a moment to tussle WilyKat's mane before answering. "I'll be glad to help out. The twins aren't the only ones tired of being cooped up in the Lair." WilyKat scowled up at Lion-O and rubbed the back of his own neck.

Felina sighed softly. If Lion-O was going, she'd stay behind. Tensions had run high between her and her mate since Bela's death and the subsequent clumsy attempts to mend the relationship only strained it more. To compound issues, she was a week into her first fertile time since being reunited with her brethren, so the less they spent time together, the better. "I've been getting more done studying during the last few days than I have in months. I seem to be on a role...I might as well stick with it." She shrugged and forced a weak smile, knowing her excuse sounded

lame.

Tygra nodded. "I think I'll stay here as well. Cheetara's closer to term and I don't want to venture too far from her."

"That's understandable," Panthro agreed. "Kit, Kat...Lion-O. Let's go."



Hours later, the gentle patter of the rain against the windowpane soon had Felina nodding off as she sat at her desk, the Book of Omens open before her. A cry from a nearby chamber roused her from her daze. Felina nearly plowed into Snarf as she dashed out into the hallway. "What's going on?"

"Rrrrrrwl. It's Cheetara," was all the Snarf bothered to explain before bounding off ahead of Felina and skidding sideways on his haunches into Cheetara's room. Felina ran in close behind the snarf and observed the cheetah lying on her bed, in obvious discomfort.

The baby was Felina's first thought. But Cheetara wasn't due for another few weeks. She rushed to the elder cat's bedside, and gingerly sat upon the edge. "Labor?" The one-word question sounded very obvious and silly, even as Felina spoke it.

Cheetara closed her eyes and took a deep breath before answering. "Yes. I -- I've been having mild cramping off and on for the last few days. I thought it was just false pains...but now...."

Felina's eyes traveled down the pregnant form of her friend until she realized that the coverlets and sheets were clearly soaked. There was no doubt, the cub was coming. Felina gulped hard and fought the panic rising within her. She had witnessed a few Emite births but she had no idea what to do in this case. "Snarf...where's Tygra?"

Snarf cast his worried eyes up at Felina from where he peeked over the bed's edge. "I went looking for him first. Couldn't find him, sneeyarf sneeyarf."

"Stay here Snarf," she replied, giving a quick pat to Cheetara's hand. "I'll find him."

Snarf hopped up beside Cheetara and rubbed her shoulder sympathetically. Through the worry, Felina thought she saw a spark of excitement in the old snarf's eye. "Okay, sneeyarf snarf."

Felina darted out the door and down the hall, calling out Tygra's name every so often on her way to the control room. She found the room deserted. Undeterred, she punched a few buttons which brought up a split screen of every major room in the Lair...and there was Tygra, visible in one of them. He looked to be checking out the power exhaust and generator in the lower level. She quickly paged him on the intercom. "Tygra, you must come to Cheetara's room immediately. She's in labor and I don't know what to do."

She could see Tygra rush to the com-center on the wall. "Okay. I'm going to need to grab a few things from my lab to assist in the delivery, Felina." If he was alarmed, his voice didn't give it away.

This seemed reasonable and Felina nodded, even though Tygra had no screen with which to see her do so. What he said next, she wasn't expecting.

"While I'm doing that, you and Snarf need to get Cheetara ready to abandon the Lair."

Felina did a double take. "W-what?"

"The water table...it's rising and we're starting to take in water down here. If this rain and flooding continue, I'm afraid something might give. I can't be sure the integrity of the Lair's structure won't be compromised," he quickly explained.

Sure enough, Felina spied the square of telescreen which held the outside shot of the Lair, and incredibly, the waters of the moat in front of the Lair were visible -- perhaps a mere 2 feet from cresting the lip of the moat. The basement area with all the power equipment was beneath the Lair, underground, and no doubt all that swollen moat water was putting unprecedented stress on the walls. "We'll meet back here, in the control room then. All of us." She took one last look at the outside view in front of the Lair. Past the open field and a strip of forest, she made out the exaggerated blue line that was the River of Despair. She briefly wondered how the others were doing in their quest to help the Berbils cope with the angry river.



Panthro, up to his ankles in slippery mud, held his spot in the assembly line at the Berbils' endangered village. He tossed the sandbags up on the levee as fast as they came down the line. He blinked back the raindrops from his eyes and flashed a lopsided smirk at WilyKat. The boy beside him was clearly failing at the tough front he tried to project, the fatigue and exhaustion on his face giving him away. "You alright, Kat? No shame in taking a breather, you know."

WilyKat cast a glance at his equally tired-looking sister by his side, before answering crossly, "I'm alright, Panthro." WilyKat, caught off guard by the next incoming sandbag, was off-balance as the bag sank into his arms, causing him -- and the bag -- to drop gracelessly into the mud below.

Kit scowled, brushing off the healthy daubing of mud in which WilyKat's fall coated her. "Kat, watch what you're doing for Jaga's sake."

Before Panthro could chuckle at the sight of the muddied twins, he was alarmed by a loud crack following a blinding flash of lightning. He was vaguely aware of Berbils shrieking and fanning out in every direction. The shadow of a large tree loomed over himself and the twins. He bent, scooping up Kit and Kat, and dived as the massive trunk came crashing down. They tumbled hard to the ground when a large bough struck Panthro from behind. The kittens, freed from his grasp, slid through the mud to safety. Panthro, however, was not as fortunate. His leg -- his good leg at that -- was pinned beneath a thick and heavy bough of the splintered oak. Panthro could not wrest himself free, despite much writhing and grunting.

"Blast, I'm stuck," he muttered. His brow furrowed, and he gulped hard. There was a mighty pain in his leg. But his fear -- his darkest fear -- was that he'd lose the leg as he had the other. It had been harder on him than he'd ever let on openly; the task of learning to walk with the prosthetic -- not to mention coming to terms with losing the leg in the first place. Could he be so cursed as to lose the other now as well? If he couldn't get out soon, the crushing weight of the tree limb could very well cut off circulation, his tissues would die, and then --

Panthro shook his head as if to perish the thought from his mind. No way was that going to happen, he sternly decided. He growled fiercely -- partly to mask his increasing pain, and partly

to express this determination.

"Kit, Kat...are you alright?" WilyKat looked up to see Lion-O's concerned face.

"Yeah, I'm in one piece...I think," Kat replied as he accepted Lion-O's help in rising to his feet.

"Me too," Kit chimed in, getting up on her own accord. "But Panthro..."

The trio took in Panthro's situation. If it wasn't for Panthro's bald pate being visible amid the tangle of branches, he would've been hard to detect, indeed. "Hold on," Lion-O said once he'd reached the spot where Panthro lay. "We'll get you out of here."

Panthro snarled, trying in vain to free his good leg. At least the soft, muddy ground kept the weight of the limb from crushing his leg outright....for now. "Hurry up," Panthro replied gruffly. *No way* was he going to lose this leg too, he vowed to himself once again. *No way*. He blinked back moisture from his eyes and told himself it was just more of the accursed rain.

"Let me try," Kat offered, slipping a capsule from his belt.

Lion-O regarded the capsule hopefully. "What kind of capsule is it?"

"A blasting cap," Kat explained. "Should blow that limb right off him."

"That's what I'm afraid of -- blowing *his* limb right off," Kit chided. WilyKat glared a moment at his sibling before defiantly thrusting his tongue out at her.

Lion-O slowly nodded. "She's right, Kat. I won't use the Sword to blast it off him for similar reasons. Ever have a splinter?"

"Well yeah," Kat conceded.

"Imagine how a chunk of oak shrapnel lodged in your chest, arm -- face even -- would feel," Lion-O elaborated.

Panthro twisted enough to look up at the trio speaking around him. "He's right. That's no good. Gotta find another way...and quick."

Kit spoke while tossing a pellet of her own confidently from hand to hand.

"This capsule will morph into an inflatable creature soon as it hits the mud. Should lift the branch right off of Panthro."

"Sorry Kit, that's no good either," Lion-O gently explained.

"Ha!" Kat declared, unable to resist expressing his triumph.

WilyKit ignored her brother and looked to Lion-O with some degree of annoyance. "Why not?"

Panthro answered before Lion-O had a chance to speak. "Something like that is too uncertain. Can't risk it."

"Exactly," Lion-O concurred. "There's no real way to control how the capsule will expand. There's a chance it could inflate in a way that will actually push the limb onto Panthro more instead of off of him."

Kit replaced the inflating pellet and sighed. "Sorry Panthro, I tried."

Panthro managed a strained chuckle. "It's alright, kid." He tried feverishly to wrest his leg free. But it was no use; it wouldn't budge. Panthro glared at the rough bark covering the bough that imprisoned him, and felt hot tears running down his face in stark contrast with the cool rain. Even as he told himself they were tears of anger and frustration he was grateful at least the others couldn't tell he wept.

Lion-O considered using brute strength to push the limb off Panthro, but because of the greasy earth, he couldn't risk losing leverage and harming Panthro more if he slipped -- or end up pinning himself. There had to be another way.

A tentative robotic voice came from behind the 'Cats. "Pardon me, Lion-O," Robear Bill interrupted. "But perhaps we can help."



Meanwhile, Felina was getting drenched by the rain atop the Lair's head, doing her best to steady Cheetara as Tygra looked for a place to secure his bolo whip. A loud crack of thunder caused Felina to flinch and Snarf to simultaneously cry out. Felina was barely aware of Snarf's soft utterings about being out in such weather, the anomaly of it, and most of all, how much snarfs despise getting wet. She patted Cheetara on the shoulder and watched Tygra extend his whip out and over the gap that existed between the Lair head and the cliff behind it. The whip snapped and flew upward, gripping a stout but sturdy shrub near the cliff's edge. The trio of red globes at the whip's end caught where the shrub's branches met its thicker trunk, ensuring that there would be no slippage. Tygra gave the line a firm tug just to be extra sure.

Without a word, he motioned for Cheetara to stand beside him. She hesitated long enough to grimace through another short but sharp contraction, before responding to his silent cue. Holding the end of the whip with one hand and wrapping his free arm around Cheetara, he prepared to transverse the gap. Tygra turned briefly to Felina before he left. "As soon as I get Cheetara settled on the higher ground up there, I'll come back for you."

Felina squinted through the driving rain at Tygra, and crossed her arms, tucking her hands under her armpits to keep the shivers at bay. "Okay."

It was then Tygra hoisted himself and Cheetara over to the steep cliff wall against which the Lair had been built. Cheetara clung to him as he clearly spent great effort using his legs and what he could of his arms to hoist them upward. He paused several times on the way up to reaffirm his hold of Cheetara and to adjust the pack of supplies he wore on his back. Felina sighed in relief as Tygra and Cheetara cleared the edge and disappeared over the top of the cliff, the whip soon following suit.

"Aw, c'mon Felina," groaned a clearly annoyed Snarf. "Can't you use one of your arrows to get across? I don't wanna wait for Tygra...it's wet out here. And miserable. And we're both gonna catch our death of cold!"

Felina looked down at the pitiful creature, his fur matted and lying limp and flat against his body. Her eyes next scanned up the twenty foot or so it was to the lip of the cliff and to the shrub. Truth was, she wouldn't mind getting out of the weather herself, and was sure she'd have the strength to hoist herself to the top, even with a grown Snarf in tow.

"You win," Felina declared as she slid her bow off her shoulder and unsheathed an arrow with a rope attached. That variety of arrow was something she'd learned to fashion during her training among the warrior maidens.

Her fingers were so chilled by the wind and the cold rain, Felina could barely feel the string glide across them as she drew her bow. The arrow sliced up through the rain, the head of which buried itself into the same sturdy shrub Tygra had used to anchor his whip moments before.

"That's more like it," Snarf declared after letting out a cheer. Snarf quickly climbed onto Felina's back, his claws digging into the backpack she wore. "Rowr, I'm not going to like this

part,” he muttered.

Felina replaced her bow and tugged on the rope to make sure it was secure. “Just hang on tight,” she advised him.

Snarf had no time to have second thoughts for Felina ran and leapt off the Lair head, using her feet to make a jarring landing against the cliff wall. She grunted with the dual effort to support their weight and keep a grip on the rain-slicked rope. Felina made sure she had a good foothold before beginning their slow ascent.

“Don’t look down,” Snarf wailed, “I’ll do it for both of us.”

Felina paused, using her shoulder to push a tuft of soaked mane out of her eyes as best she could. “I know better than that, Snarf. You probably shouldn’t look down either for that matter.”

“Too late.” Felina nearly lost her grip as Snarf struggled to get a better hold on the backpack.

Once that harried moment passed, the snarf fell silent and Felina concentrated on the task at hand. All went well until they were within feet of their destination. A loud whoosh followed by the thunderous roar of a wall of water rocked the pair as they dangled there precariously. Felina struggled to get a good grip and a decent foothold, all the while craning her neck to see what had happened. “Snarf, what’s going on?” she shouted above the din, for she couldn’t twist good enough to see for herself.

“Raaaawr! The levees downstream must have gave way....it’s awful! Part of the cliff on the north side disintegrated when the wall of water hit it and now the Lair’s half submerged. What a mess!” reported Snarf.

Felina nodded. The Lair moat was fed by a tributary of the River of Despair, part of which flowed underground. She remembered Tygra explaining that when they built the Lair, they dug deeper into a natural ravine surrounding the Lair and hit water. Apparently, there was no part of the river underground any longer...the flood waters put too much pressure on the walls, and it all burst forth, threatening their home. So much for building on high ground.

“What’s going on?” Tygra’s voice boomed above, causing Felina to startle and slip down a bit.

“Tygra! Thank Jaga! Help us up!” Snarf pleaded.

Tygra stretched a striped arm down to assist the dangling pair.

“Go ahead, Snarf. You go first,” Felina insisted. She figured it would be easier for her to maneuver if she didn’t have to worry about the effect her every movement had on the snarf.

Snarf wasted no time scrambling up and letting Tygra hoist him to safety. Next was Felina’s turn. Just as she reached up to take Tygra’s hand, the arrow imbedded in the shrub broke off below the tip, and Felina felt herself falling. She dug into the stone cliff wall with her claws like a wild cat, until she managed to get a hold of some tangled roots sticking out between some cracks. However, the rope was long gone, completing the descent without her to the rushing rapids below. She also fell well out of Tygra’s reach.

“Hold on. Grab the whip,” Tygra instructed, though Felina read his lips more than actually heard him speak the words.

Seconds later, the bolo whip came flying by her and she quickly grabbed it. She was on her way up, Tygra’s strength hauling her upward nearly effortlessly. Suddenly, she was horrified to find herself falling again. Tygra, apparently, lost his balance on the greasy slope and was tumbling down after her. Felina cried out as she fell. Her eyes fixed on Tygra’s face for a moment, which seemingly reflecting her terrified expression back to her. She wondered briefly if they would make it to the water or if they would fail to even clear the broad shoulders of the Lair. That quandary was answered as soon as her backside met with the frigid flood waters,

which pulled her into its murky depths and swiftly carried her away. Any awareness soon escaped her, including what became of Tygra.



“Hurry up, Kat!” WilyKit called back to her brother.

Kat wobbled about on his space board, fighting to regain his balance. “It’s not easy going full blast in this storm,” Kat hollered.

“I’m not havin’ any trouble,” Kit teased. “Besides, you can’t go full blast anytime.”

Kat narrowed his eyes, and started to scoff, only to have it quickly turn into a yelp when he nearly tipped the board. “It’s not fair,” he muttered. “I should have got the new board. *Her’s* was the one destroyed by the Mutants after all. Instead, I get stuck with the same old *malfunctioning* board...”

“WilyKat...look!”

His sister’s cry brought Kat out of his grousing. He followed to where she pointed and gasped. There was the Lair with flood waters cutting a huge swath through the field before it. The water level was up to the main entrance, lapping at the lofty doors. WilyKit had already increased her speed and was well ahead of him, all the while he struggled to keep up and at the same time, keep on his board.

Just as he crossed over the churning rapids, he noticed a rather drenched and wildly gesturing Snarf atop the cliff behind the Lair. He changed directions along with his sister, and they soon circled the frazzled creature. “Snarf, what happened?” WilyKit asked as she dismounted her board.

“Am I glad to see you! But where’s Lion-O? He needs to be here...Cheetara’s having the baby and -- and Felina and Tygra--”

“Whoa, slow down,” Kit interrupted. “Cheetara’s having the baby...out here?”

Kit cast a quizzical glance at her brother who merely shrugged. What did he know about birthing cubs? Besides, it was clearly good Cheetara wasn’t in the Lair by the looks of things.

Snarf waved his hand in the direction of an outcropping of rocks several yards away. “She’s okay for now...Tygra set her up in a makeshift shelter before...before he and Felina fell...down there.” Snarf’s final words were marked with a pitiful squeak of his voice. He averted his eyes and jerked his thumb toward the cliff’s edge.

Kat looked in that direction and his eyes widened when he saw the clear markings where Tygra had slid through the mud and over the cliff. “Whoa,” he muttered, unable to articulate the jolt of emotion he felt any clearer.

“We gotta see if they’re okay down there,” Kit firmly decided, tugging on the sleeve of Kat’s tunic.

“Oh, uh, right,” Kat replied, snapping out of his astonished daze.

Snarf snorted. “What about Cheetara? I -- I don’t know what to do!”

Kat looked down at Snarf and gave an exaggerated shrug. “What do you expect us to do, Snarf? You were Lion-O’s nurse maid...how can you not know what to do?”

Snarf paced about, sloshing across the soggy earth before the twins. “I took care of Lion-O

after his birth. His mother had midwives and whatnot attending her for the birth...I don't know a thing about delivering a cub!"

Kit shifted about, clearly uncomfortable. "Well, uh, doesn't nature kind of....kind of well, take its own course?"

Snarf shrugged helplessly. "I...I don't know. Sometimes things go wrong," he continued in a small voice, his ears drooping. "I'm worried."

When didn't Snarf worry, Kat wondered. Just then a distinct cry came from the area of the rock outcrop. Kat wasn't sure what to expect as he rounded the side of the rock to the lee side. The rock, it seemed, was C-shaped, and Tygra had taken a canvas of some sort and hung it around the outside of the opening. He nudged his sister in front of him. Her only protest was to cast him a scowl before pushing back the canvas and stepping into the shelter of the oddly shaped rock form. A lantern cast an eerie glow in the cavern, and WilyKat nearly ran over his sister when she stopped suddenly.

There lying before them Cheetara. She was sprawled out on a blanket and in the throes of another contraction. "Yeesh," Kat grunted.

"Isn't this kind of early?" Kit whispered to Snarf.

"I guess not," he replied wearily. "Won't one of you stay here?"

Kat gave his sister a hard shove forward. "Hey--"

"She will!" he blurted before dashing back out into the rain and mounting his space board. Once flying freely, if somewhat wobbly through the air, WilyKat focused on looking for any sign of Tygra and Felina. He flew above the water, heading downstream all the way until it spilled into the Lake of the Unicorn Forrest. There was no sign of his friends anywhere. He swept upward and over the trees, heading back to the Berbil village -- he had to tell Lion-O what was going on.



Felina coughed furiously as the frigid waters slapped at her. Blinking several times, she realized she was somehow keeping her head up above the water. Branches and other debris tumbled past her in the rushing water. But how was she managing this feat of floating upright? It was certainly by no effort of her own. She seemed to be held up by some...magic?

Sudden realization washed over her. "Tygra?" she asked tentatively, remembering the sight of him tumbling off the cliff after her. "Are you there?"

"Yes," came his reply, his invisible form guiding them to a large piece of driftwood. "Hold on to this."

She did as instructed, slightly bobbing down into the water when he apparently released his hold on her. It was strange to hear his voice and know he was near yet see no sign of Tygra. Felina's body shuddered from the cold. "We need to get out of here...so cold."

Tygra slid the whip off his body from where it had been coiled around his torso. As a result, he slowly came into view again. He sent the whip forth, and it wrapped around a mighty oak tree on a steep bank. Collecting Felina by wrapping his free hand around her waist, he pulled them both to shore. Once they climbed their way to the level ground atop the embankment, Felina

shook herself of some of the excess water. It was a relief to be out of the water and under the canopy of trees that shielded them from most of the driving rain and wind.

Felina flashed a small smile in Tygra's direction. "Thank you."

He nodded solemnly and headed north toward the Lair. Felina sighed and followed, knowing he was likely worried about Cheetara. "I know you're worried," she said, looking earnestly at him as she followed. Perhaps the sound of the rushing waters below made it impossible for him to hear. Felina quickened her steps until she was walking beside the tiger. Laying a hand gently on his forearm, she added, "It'll be alright."

Tygra paused and smiled faintly. "The Eye be with Cheetara." he closed his eyes and sighed. "She's strong, I think she'll be alright, too. I just want to be there with her."

Felina nodded. "Let's hurry then," she announced before breaking into a run. They can't have gone very far...could they have?

Tygra matched her gait, both of them zig zagging around the trees that dotted the embankment. Neither noticed a boy on a space board flying just above the floodwaters.



Lion-O sheathed the Sword and looked to the concerned Thunderkitten before him. "They're okay, WilyKat," he said, referring to the vision the sword had shown him of Tygra and Felina. It definitely looked like his friends weren't going to be able to help free Panthro, however. They all seemed to have troubles of their own. Perhaps help wouldn't be necessary. The industrious Berbils, with the help of the Warrior Maidens who had been called to assist, had erected a makeshift crane. "We may be able to manage without help."

"What about Cheetara?" Kat wondered aloud. "She didn't look so good and Snarf and WilyKit don't know what to do."

Willa, who was making sure the ropes attached to the limb pinning Panthro were secure, overheard the pair's conversation. "I couldn't help but overhear. Is Cheetara having the cub?"

WilyKat nodded. "Yeah. She's outside, under a rock formation on the cliff behind the Lair. They had to move her there because the Lair's flooding."

"I see. I've assisted in the births of many of my own people. I'd be willing to coach her through it," Willa offered.

Lion-O was surely grateful for the woman's help. It wouldn't have been much use for him to go, given he knew next to nothing about delivering a child. "I'd appreciate that, Willa. WilyKat, show her the way on the space board. I'll get Panthro out and join you soon."

Kat agreed without a fuss. "I did kind of leave Kit there unwillingly. If I don't get back soon, she'll be all the more sore at me," he confessed.

Lion-O watched briefly as Kat flew off with Willa following skillfully through the boughs of the forest, before turning his attention back to the task at hand. "We'll have you out soon," he told Panthro, keeping the confidence strong in his voice.

"Hurry," Panthro rasped. "Getting cold in this mud...can't feel my leg..."

Lion-O nodded and left his friend's side to take his place with the Berbils and Warrior

Maidens where they prepared to use the network of ropes and pulleys to lift the massive limb off Panthro.



Cheetara writhed, the pain of another contraction hitting her hard and fast. She gripped WilyKit's hand hard and could tell it was perhaps too hard judging from the tears that welled up in the young teen's eyes. Cheetara looked over the top of her swollen belly at Willa, who was now crouched between the cheetah's legs.

"He's crowning," Willa informed her. "Keep pushing."

"I can't help but push," Cheetara gasped as soon as the contraction passed. The contractions were practically coming on top of each other now, and she kept telling herself that it would just be a little longer. A little longer and she'd be cradling the cub she and Tygra dreamed of having for so long...

A flash of lighting illuminated Willa's face as she smiled slightly at the birthing ThunderCat. "You're doing fine."

"Where's Tygra?" Cheetara wondered before another contraction came. The worried look WilyKit and Snarf exchanged went unnoticed by Cheetara -- they had yet to explain exactly what was taking so long, not wishing to upset her that much just yet.

"He's on his way," Willa said, remembering what Lion-O said of his vision in the Sword. "Just concentrate on pushing."

With an anguished cry, Cheetara succeeded in delivering the infant's head, which Willa gently cupped in her hands. "It's coming!" the Warrior Maiden cried breathlessly.

Cheetara looked up at the wide-eyed WilyKit and smiled between ragged, panting breaths. Cheetara's elation, however, soon turned to cold fear. The expression on Willa's face changing from excitement to deep concern sent a chill down Cheetara's spine. "By Thundera, Willa. What's wrong?"

Willa shook her head quickly. "The baby...it's...it's lips are turning blue."

WilyKit yipped as a result of another hard squeeze of her hand, courtesy of Cheetara. "Do something," Cheetara begged. She clenched her eyes tightly shut. **This can't be happening**

"I see the problem," Willa said evenly, no panic evident in her voice, but concern still etched on her face. Snarf, apparently, could see the problem as well from his vantage point behind Willa, and so began pacing about and muttering to himself. "The cord," she continued, "is wrapped around the baby's neck cutting off his air."

"Oh no," Kit whispered.

Tears tumbled down Cheetara's cheeks. "No," she sobbed. Then, another contraction came causing her to cry out.

Willa looked up in alarm. "Cheetara, you cannot push now. I have to try to slip the cord off the child's neck first. If you push, you risk strangling the child further."

Cheetara gritted her teeth and nodded. It was harder than she imagined resisting the urge to push, and she focused on a shadow created by the lantern which danced on the ceiling above her. She also began taking quick, shallow breaths. Her concentration became so focused, in fact, that

she barely noticed as Kit delicately pushed her sweat-soaked locks off her forehead.

She blinked once the contraction passed and looked to Willa hopefully. However, the disappointment in Cheetara's heart was almost crushing when Willa's eyes met hers. "The cord is too short. If I slip it off, I risk rupturing your placenta and you'll bleed to death."

"I don't care," Cheetara declared with abandon. "Save the cub. Please, just save the cub."

WilyKit gasped. "Cheetara, no!"

"There is a way to save them both," Willa explained, "but it's drastic."

Snarf groaned. "By Jaga," he declared, burying his face in his paws. "I wish Lion-O were here."

Meanwhile, Willa quickly removed the casing to the lantern and held the metal of her dagger over the flame inside. Cheetara resumed focusing on that shadowy spot on the rocks above, steeling herself for what she knew was to come. Willa intended to cut the child from her -- it was the only way.

"I wish I had time to prepare an anesthetic paste," Willa stated regrettably, poisoning the hot blade over Cheetara's abdomen.

"Do what you must," Cheetara nearly whispered, ignoring WilyKit's panicked whimpers and Snarf's sorrowful wailings.



Night was falling and the rain finally slowed to a whispering drizzle. "I am **never** having cubs," WilyKit declared while rubbing her abused hand -- the one that had been at the mercy of the long-suffering cheetah.

WilyKat grinned from where he sat beside his twin, bathed in the light of a small campfire built inside the rock shelter. "You don't mean that. Just look at them," he said, taking in the sight of Cheetara and Tygra lying side by side nearby, and snuggling their newborn daughter.

"Easy for you to say," she scoffed. "You didn't see **how** she was born. You were too chicken to even come inside and look!"

WilyKat looked indignant. "You would've bolted out of there too if Cheetara hadn't had a death grip on your hand."

"I owe you two much," Tygra told them, looking up from the slumbering face of his daughter at the duo. The firelight only amplified his clearly fatigued visage. "And Willa!" His face lit up considerably as the Warrior Queen ducked in from the night and under the open flap of the temporary shelter.

She nodded in acknowledgement of Tygra's greeting, kneeling beside the recovering and exhausted cheetah. "Here, eat more of this," Willa instructed. She guided a hollowed-out shell full of green paste toward Cheetara's lips. "It will ease the pain of your surgery."

Once Cheetara partook of the offering, Willa smiled slightly at Tygra, sorrow sparkling in her dark eyes. "Don't thank me too much. She won't be able to have any more children. The way in which I mended the incision made in her womb will be effective, but never will it be strong enough to sustain another pregnancy."

"I understand," Tygra said, patting the woman's hand. "The important thing is you saved

them both. And for that, I will be forever grateful.”

Willa cast a fond glance at the tiny infant. “She can’t weigh more than five pounds,” she remarked. “What shall you call her?”

“Yeah,” Kit piped up. “I wondered that too.”

He looked to Cheetara to add her input but chuckled when he saw she too had fallen asleep. “We figured as the first Thunderian born since the disaster on Thundera, we’d break from the tradition of giving her a feline derived name,” he explained. “One of the words from the old tongue Felina taught me was ‘velour’, which means ‘great hope’.” He paused for effect. “Therefore, we shall call her Velouria.”

“It’s beautiful,” Willa agreed.

“I think it’d be a beautiful thing to have some of that plant dope, Willa,” Panthro grouched in a half groggy state. “My leg is killing me.” He was propped up against the far wall, his broken but intact leg elevated to relieve swelling.

“At least you won’t lose the leg,” Tygra noted as Willa obliged the panther’s request. Panthro simply grunted his reply.

WilyKat shifted uncomfortably. “When we gonna be able to go back in the Lair?”

“We can’t do much until daylight and the water fully recedes,” Tygra replied. “Only then will we know the extent of the damage. Don’t worry. Willa’s offered for all of us to stay in the treetop kingdom, so you won’t have to sleep on the hard stone tonight.”

Kit sighed. “It’s cramped in here. I’m going to go see what Lion-O’s doing.”

No sooner did Kit exit the campsite with her brother in tow than Lion-O pulled up in the ThunderTank. Leaping out, he saluted the twins briefly. “Tank’s a bit soggy, but it held up surprisingly well in the hangar.”

“How’d you get in the hangar?” Kat wondered. “I thought the Lair didn’t have any power.”

“It doesn’t. I had to use the manual crank override,” Lion-O replied with a suppressed sigh. “Everyone ready to head off to the Treetop Kingdom?”

It was then Felina emerged from the growing darkness and approached them. She glanced into the shelter, taking in the sight of the new family inside, but she was clearly quite upset about something.

WilyKit didn’t like the vibe she was picking up on. “What’s wrong, Felina? Where have you been?”

Felina bit her lip, and looked to Kit and Kat, to Lion-O, then back again. “I couldn’t find it,” she finally said shakily.

“What?” Kit was totally lost.

“It was on my back...the Book. The Book of Omens. It came off in the water I guess. It’s gone,” Felina explained in a rush, her lip now quivering. “In all the confusion when we first came out of the river, I hadn’t noticed it was gone...” She looked about helplessly, too distraught to go on.

Kit sucked in a sharp breath. “Oh no...”

“Can’t the Sword find it Lion-O?” WilyKat suggested hopefully.

“Good idea,” Lion-O agreed. The hope drained from their faces as Lion-O lowered the Sword following an attempt at Second Sight. They could tell news wasn’t going to be good. “I saw...nothing.”

Kit’s mind whirled with what that could mean. The hair on the nape of her neck stood on end when she swore she heard the cackle of an ancient mummy carried on the wind.

*We can plant a seed
And watch it grow
Food enough to fill a table
Running water down an overflow
Eat as much as we are able
But would the fruit turn ripe
If the rains had never been?*

*Oh Lord deliver us from the elements
We at your mercy and your reverence
Oh Lord deliver us from the elements
We've no defense we are impotent*

*You can travel far to distant lands
Some so hot no man could bear
You can conquer peaks with winds of sand
Where Mother Nature didn't care
Would not our world turn cold
If the sun refused to shine*

*Oh Lord deliver us from the elements
We at your mercy and your reverence
Oh Lord deliver us from the elements
We've no defense we are impotent*

*And when the world grows old
And we know more than our brains can hold
Nature will be law
Well we're as helpless now as we've ever been before
Would not our world turn cold
If the sun refused to shine*

*Oh Lord deliver us from the elements
We at your mercy and your reverence
Oh Lord deliver us from the elements
We've no defense we are impotent*

-- Deliver Us From the Elements, XTC

After the Rain
Epilogue to Chapter 16 of *Signal in the Sky*
Contributed by Knight Writer

There are times in every life where one great event, one awesome realization, shakes the foundation of your very world. That one moment where you know that nothing will be the same and, for better or worse, the world as you once knew it no longer has any meaning.

For Tygra, standing on the high boughs of Shemlock, overlooking the swollen rivers whose contents had long since flowed free of their bounds, that moment was now, and that realization was this:

He was a father.

A father!

Even after all the months of waiting, of anxious days and nights, that simple fact had hit his mind like a rocket.

The thoughts of the Mutants, of Mumm-Ra, of the damage the flood had probably done to Cat's Lair, none of it was relevant as he turned that idea over and over in his mind.

"A new life," Tygra whispered softly to the rising sun whose light was refracted into a million shards of gold on the rippling waters below and the dew on the bark beneath his feet. His child. Cheetara's child. "Our child."

The knowledge that he had helped create the wonder which now nursed at Cheetara's breast brought an untold sensation of pride, of fulfillment. He glanced back toward the site of the makeshift shelter in which she had been born not even a day ago - a stone's throw away from the Treetop Kingdom - and couldn't help but feel a sense of awe. Even in the middle of nature's unbridled fury, its most simple and precious gift had still been bestowed. Not easily, the delivery had been hell on Cheetara, but there was no changing that. Childbirth was never an easy thing, regardless.

But, a piece of him and of Cheetara would live on forever. Let Mumm-Ra have his thousands of years in a tomb, his decayed and rotted body animated by malevolent magic. This, THIS was the true meaning of immortality, of eternity! Through the one act of giving life, of bearing a child, all you were and all that came before you lived on into the new generation.

He heard the voices from below, and ended his reverie. There would be time enough for such profound thinking later. For now, there were far more important things to attend to.

"Velouria," he said as he strode to the hank of rope which led to the huts below. The first Thunderian born on Third Earth. The first - and most incredible - sign that Thundera was not dead. A single great hope.