

## *Chapter 21 of Signal in the Sky*

### **What Difference Does It Make?**

By Purrsia Kat & Spaced Angel

The smell of rotting vegetation dogged Monkian's every footstep as he wended his way through the dank forest. The night brought rain that had fallen steadily until the early hours when the clouds gave way to blue skies and sunshine. Water sizzled on wet leaves in the heat and turned to steam, making the atmosphere amongst the trees humid and uncomfortable.

Once, when salty sweat trickled down his face into his eyes, he stopped and removed his helmet to mop his brow. Any thoughts he had entertained of continuing bareheaded were soon squashed when the local fauna dropped something messy and unpleasant in his hair. Since then, he had continued on his way with his helmet firmly pressed down on his head. As far as Monkian was concerned, the great outdoors was something to be endured rather than enjoyed and he fell to wondering why he was bothering when any other sensible Mutant would be enjoying a hearty breakfast safe in Castle Plun-darr.

After what seemed like an age of walking, a tree root half hidden in the leaf litter caught his toe and finally brought his journey to an end. The forest air filled with curses as he rubbed his injured foot and yelled out the injustice of it to anyone within earshot. Not that there was anyone about, he thought bitterly. In an hour of walking, he had met only birds and wide-eyed forest creatures, who had scuttled away at his approach. The person he was meant to be meeting was nowhere to be seen. She liked her little games, but today he was in no mood to play. He shouted out her name and a reply came almost immediately with the hand that clamped suddenly over his mouth and stifled him.

"Silence!" a voice whispered in his ear. "Do you want everyone to know where we are?"

He pushed the hand away from his mouth and turned on his assailant. "You took your time, Arilla!" he grunted.

She crouched a few feet away, her fur clothes wet with rain and mud, smiling up at him from under her curling black lashes. "Don't be angry," she said, all too winningly for his liking. "I came as soon as I could."

"Did you? Hoo-hoo, an hour after sunrise, you said, and I've been trudging about in this infernal forest for twice that long."

She sidled over to him. "I have to be careful," she said, stroking the rough hair of his chest. "You know they don't trust me. You can forgive me, can't you?"

"That depends on what you have to tell me," he said, roughly pushing her away. She ended up on the forest floor, with resentment burning in her fierce brown eyes. He had seen that

look there before, when he had met her for the first time in this wood and she had spoken of her hatred for her Warrior Maiden sisters, intensified by their friendship with the ThunderCats – alien beings she cared for even less. It was an old story and one he knew all too well. A challenge to the established leadership gone wrong and ostracism had been the price of their failure. Arilla blamed everyone but herself for her now lowly status within the tribe and Monkian had obligingly concurred, if secretly he had little sympathy for her complaints. She had tried her hand with risky gamble and lost.

At least her fate had been better than that of the others who had been exiled from the tribe. Despite Arilla's assurances that they would one day return to the Treetop Kingdom as leaders, he had his doubts. From what he had been told of the Warrior Maidens, Willa ruled with a rod of iron and would tolerate no challengers. There were too many places in these woods where a soul could get lost and too many hungry creatures to devour the evidence of foul play. Arilla would have to wait a long time for her fellow conspirators to return.

Still, it suited him to indulge these little fantasies of hers. She was bitter enough to want to cause Willa some grief and consequently had been pathetically eager to feed him interesting snippets of information regarding the transport of grain shipments to the Treetop Kingdom and the movements of their hunting parties. Nothing, Monkian had noticed, that would work too much to the detriment of her tribe, but rather to reflect badly on the leader she held responsible for her grievances.

But it was her lingering mistrust of the ThunderCats that caught Monkian's interest – on that they could agree, even if her motivations seemed more to do with spiting Willa than any real fear of the felines. He recognized the old 'a friend of my enemy is an enemy as well' philosophy. He tried not to let it bother him that it could have just as easily been the Mutants she was working against, if things had turned out a bit differently, given Willa didn't much care for either set of newcomers at first. Since the Thundercats so trusted the Warrior Maidens, Arilla was often privy to information the Mutants had no way of otherwise knowing. Of course, he liked to keep her his little secret – all the other Mutants knew was that Monkian had a "source" for he liked keeping credit for such information for himself. At least, when her information was accurate, which it usually was - most of the time.

With a sigh, he held out his hand to her. "Sorry," he said gruffly, smarting at the indignation of having to use that word. "It's been a bad week."

She accepted the peace offering and allowed him to pull her up to her feet. "Trouble with the Thundercats?" He grunted. "I wondered who gave you that black eye."

"I got it falling out of my Skycutter," he retorted.

Arilla smiled, not deceived by this lie. "Of course," she said, smoothing down the ruffled fur of her bikini top. "It's about them that I wanted to see you."

"Oh?"

"For a start, I found this." From the sack she had dumped near a tree, she drew a metal object. A large funnel protruded from a hefty square block, its sides lined with coloured buttons. "I thought it might be yours."

"It's Vultureman's Thundranium device." Monkian took it from her and was surprised at how she had deftly carried such a heavy object.

"What does it do?" Arilla asked.

Monkian grinned. "It's a weapon we use against the Thundercats. It makes them weak. Watch this." He had a vague memory of Vultureman operating it by pulling the large red lever on the side of the device. Mud was encrusted around it, making it sticky, so he gave it a firm yank. The lever came away in his hand.

"Is that meant to happen?"

Her tone suggested she knew better and Monkian bristled. "Vultureman always makes shoddy equipment," he muttered. Examining the hole left by the lever, he saw a bar inside onto which the handle could be reattached. It seemed simple enough, although which end of the lever fitted to it was unclear. Under Arilla's critical gaze, he took a wild guess and jabbed the lever into the hole. Metal touched electronics and the device spat and hissed in his hands. He tossed it to the ground, cursing and blowing on his burnt fingers while the weapon died a smoky death.

"Must have got broken in the fight," Monkian said by way of explanation, kicking it into the undergrowth with his foot. "Vultureman will be disappointed."

"But not you?" Arilla said with a grin.

"Give me my shield any day," he declared. "Hoo-hoo, that's all I need to beat those pesky cats!"

"That and a little information." She turned her back on him and took to plucking the petals from an exuberant yellow bloom. "The Thundercats have been around a lot lately," she said idly. "Asking questions."

"About?" Monkian prompted.

"Things."

He could feel his vexation growing as she played this game with him, seeing how far she could go with this feigned reluctance to tell him before he lost his temper. He supposed it gave her some sort of satisfaction, some feeling of control. For his part, however, it was just plain annoying.

"Either tell me or not," he said. "Don't waste my time."

She spun round, beaming with triumph. "You only had to ask," she said. "Well, it seems that there could be more of their countrymen here on Third Earth."

Monkian cursed. If there weren't enough of those damned Thundercats already, they were going looking for more. "Where?" he demanded.

Arilla shrugged. "I don't know. They said something about an island."

"An island?" he murmured. "We followed the Thundercats to an island. So, what did they want with you?"

"They were asking whether we have any contact with the southern tribes."

"Do you?"

"Not much," she said. "Willa said she would send a message to them to ask them if they had come across any Thunderian survivors." Arilla leant up against a tree and bit one of her nails. "I doubt she'll get a reply."

She was toying with him again and the novelty was starting to wear thin. This time he said nothing and waited, arms folded, until she realized she would get nowhere with him. Taking up the sack again, she threw it to him. "Something for your dinner," she said.

Monkian looked in the bag and found a dead bird with a broken arrow through its chest. "I don't understand," he said.

"Messenger pigeon," she explained. "It's how we communicate with other Warrior Maiden tribes." She gave a snort of laughter. "There's one message that won't be getting there."

He found a tube attached to the bird's leg and opened the lid to find a rolled piece of paper inside. The message was short and succinct. Any information required about the whereabouts of three feline-looking strangers, going by the names of Bengali, Pumyra and Lynx-O. So, it was true. More of those damnable Thunderians! He screwed up the note and tossed it away.

"You stupid woman!" he roared. "They might have been able to tell us something! Then we could have captured them before the Thundercats!"

"Monkian, I have continued to stick my neck out for you," she said, approaching him with wide, distressed eyes. "I know the Thundercats treat you badly. I didn't think you would want more of their kind to add to your problems."

"Then you know nothing! You're just a pathetic human. What do you know of Mutant ways?"

"Enough," she retorted, her own anger rising now. "I've shared secrets with you. I've stolen and I've lied for you. And this is your response? You'd still be hiding in that hovel you call a castle if I had not been feeding you information! Ingrate."

"And why is that?" he sneered. "You think you're using us to fight your own battles. Wrong, Arilla! Hoo-hoo, I couldn't care less about you and your petty ambitions."

With that final parting shot, he stalked away. Laughter followed him and Arilla's taunting voice.

"You'll be back, Monkian!" she called after him. "You need me! Just you wait and see. And then I'll expect an apology."

She would have to wait a long time for that, Monkian resolved. It would be a very long time indeed before he groveled before a human again. He was sick and tired of her games and despite her derisive remarks to the contrary, he did not need her information. And to think, at one time he actually thought he could like her.



A stiff wind was blowing from the west, dashing leaves torn from branches against the mighty walls of Cat's Lair. Despite the conditions, Felina waited outside by the main doors, scanning the surrounding area for any sign of the Thundertank's approach. They were an hour late and concern that something happened to them had long since turned her stomach into an intricate array of knots. Ever since they started this mission to find the missing Thunderians, she had lived a half-life of worry and anticipation.

Her need to find them had become an obsession that bordered on the fanatical. They filled her every waking hour, their faces, their words, those last desperate minutes before their rescue from the ruin of Thundera and the events that had led to her being deposited on Third Earth. She had been lucky to come to a safe harbour, where she found the Emites who had taken her into their homes long before she knew anything of Lion-O and the other Thundercats. Her rescuers had been less fortunate. Waking on an island plagued with disease, it was no surprise that they left. But where had they gone? Water covered three-quarters of the planet and the ocean currents could have taken them in any direction. Equally, it could have claimed them for its own and now harboured them in a watery grave. She prayed that they survived, but as more and more avenues of investigation closed, her hopes were fading fast.

She felt something fuzzy brush against the back of her knee and looked down to see Snarf at her feet.

"I'm worried about them," she simply said to the snarf.

“Brrrr, me too. At least somebody warrants worry around here.”

Felina squeezed her eyes shut, sure of the lecture that was coming. He’d only been going on about it since the day after they’d returned from the island.

“I was laid up with that fever too, I’ll have you know,” Snarf grouched. “But did anyone notice? Nooooo.”

“I thought snarfs didn’t get fevers?” Felina countered.

Snarf cast a glance up to her that told her he didn’t appreciate being challenged. “If you want to get technical, you’re right. We don’t. But I had aches. And pains. And hallucinations. It was no picnic.”

Felina wasn’t in the mood to argue. “We’re all very sorry, Snarf. We were all a little out of our minds that night, I suppose.”

This seemed good enough for the creature, and his attention turned to the winds. “This is no place for a snarf, in all this wind, sneeyarf. I’ll just wait inside for them. Maybe there’s something on the monitor.”

She didn’t protest his departure, even if the company was at least a distraction. Felina went back to scanning the horizon for any sign of their return after Snarf left.

Her patience was rewarded by the sight of the Thundertank breaking through the trees and heading towards the Lair. She hurried down the stairs to welcome them, eager for news. From the looks on their faces, however, she knew that it was not going to be good.

"Well?" she asked anxiously. "What did the Tuskas have to say?"

Lion-O looked drawn and travel weary. He clambered out of the Tank with less than his usual enthusiasm and cast her a dull look. "Nothing. We drew a blank."

Another blow, Felina thought. They had pinned great hopes on the Tuskas. They regularly patrolled a hundred mile stretch of the southern seashore and had contacts across the continent. If they had seen or heard nothing, then it was doubtful anyone else had. The three Thunderians had clearly not gone that way.

"What now?" she asked.

Lion-O shook his head. "I don't know, Felina. We could try using the Book of Omens and Sword again, but..."

"That's a last resort?"

He nodded. "It's unpredictable at best and the Guardian made it clear last time that I shouldn't make a habit of paying him a visit."

"He threatened you?" Felina asked. The Guardian was moody and definitely humourless, but she still found it shocking he'd issue an outright threat to a Thunderian. Although, she also knew they'd been relying on the Book too much lately and it also hadn't helped that she'd so carelessly used a powerful spell. Calling out the wrath of the gods did bring down the Pyramid, but she'd been reading on and learning that the move was likely going to cost them in the long run as well as nearly killing them in the short term. The years of study she'd lost in stasis really put her at a disadvantage to advise the others on what should be done with the Book – there was so much she didn't yet know, or at the very least, wasn't aware of the full scope of consequences.

"Not in so many words. He said something about certain risks of being lost forever in time and space, which didn't sound very appealing."

It confirmed what she was already thinking. The Book and its Guardian were meant to be tools for knowledge and survival, not a crutch to solve their every little mystery. Furthermore, it was a powerful tool and one none of them could ever guarantee they could control at all times, though their abuse of its powers certainly wasn't helping.

She could understand Lion-O's reluctance and the thought of losing him to the Book did nasty things to her insides, but at the same time she was torn. He had sworn to find their missing countrymen and so far, had not been successful. Everyone they asked said the same thing - no Thunderians had passed their way. They seemed to have vanished off the face of the planet. Their last hope lay with the Warrior Maidens. Willa promised to ask the southern tribes for any information, since their range covered lands where the raft may have landed. There were no guarantees that the news would be good, but until they knew one way or another, there was little else they could do but wait. The waiting, however, was taking a toll on them all. She desired to be helpful.

"I'm sure there must be steps we could take to ensure your safety," she said, referring to the Book option. If she could just find a way to make it safer, then maybe she could make up for her part in this whole mess. "Perhaps there's something in one of my books. Why don't we--"

"Not now," Lion-O said tersely, cutting her short.

He pushed himself off the side of the Thundertank where he had been leaning and strode past her to the door, rubbing the back of his neck. Felina was about to follow when she felt Panthro's hand on her shoulder.

"Give him some time to cool off, kid," he said. "He's not in a good mood." Felina cast him an inquiring look. "He's beating himself up over this thing," Panthro explained. "He's made a promise that he's finding hard to keep. And Lion-O never likes to let people down."

"You think they aren't out there?" she asked, trying to read his expression.

Panthro shrugged. "Who knows? The trail's gone cold."

Whether he intended it or not, Felina cringed under the implied criticism. She knew she should have said something sooner and she was tired of explaining why she had not. Everyone was entitled to one mistake. "They *are* out there, and we *will* find them," she said firmly. "Believe it!"

She left him, she hoped feeling slightly stunned, and went in search of Lion-O. A quick search of the Lair revealed that he had gone to their room, although she was amused to run into Snarf at one point and found he, too, had been gruffly rebuffed. Snarf also warned her to give Lion-O some space, but she had to speak with him. It was a sense of urgency that overrode any such sage advice.

Lion-O's clothes were scattered across the bed and floor, where their owner had discarded them on his way to the bathroom. The wisps of steam creeping from beneath the door told her that he was in the shower and on impulse she decided to seek him out instead of waiting until he emerged. Perhaps she might even join him, she thought; it had been too long since they had shared an intimate moment and maybe he'd appreciate the pleasurable distraction. This was too good an opportunity to miss.

The steam that shrouded the bathroom in great white clouds hid him from her view and she had to grope her way to the shower door. Her fingers made contact with glass and a little searching found the handle. She pulled and was rewarded with the sight of Lion-O standing beneath a punishing jet from the shower, letting a soapy mixture wash over his bowed head. The noise of pounding water masked her approach and she stood there for several seconds before drawing his attention to her presence.

"Want me to wash your back?" she said, deepening her voice to a more seductive level. It was something she'd heard Cheetara do before, and it always seemed to elicit a favourable reaction out of Tygra.

He looked up in surprise and blinked away the water in his eyes to see who had disturbed him. "Oh, it's you, Felina. No, I'll be out in a minute."

The curt way he dismissed her advances made her suddenly feel very embarrassed at being there, made worse by the way he pointedly turned his back on her.

"I'll, uh, go," she said, looking for the quickest way out. He said nothing to that and concentrated on washing the shampoo from his mane. Despite his words, he clearly was not quite finished. Perhaps he just needed a little encouragement. "Unless you want me to join you?" she suggested hopefully. He'd seemed to like it before when she took the initiative, so it was worth one more shot – her embarrassment notwithstanding.

He sighed and turned off the water. The shower dribbled to its end and the steam began to fade. "Pass me that towel," he said gruffly, gesturing to the fluffy pile on the shelf.

She handed one to him, and he fairly snatched it from her hand. He stepped from the shower, shedding water onto the floor, and quickly wrapped the towel around his middle. Without giving her another look, he headed back to the bedroom. Felina followed at a discreet distance, waiting as he wiped his face and roughly dried himself off. When he could ignore her stare no longer, he glanced over his shoulder at her.

"Weren't you meant to be consulting your books or something?" he snapped. "Don't let me keep you."

His harshness stung. "Have I done something?" she asked.

His gaze slid from her eyes and fixed on the opposite wall. "No."

"Then why are you treating me like this?"

"Like what?" he shot back. "I'm tired, Felina. Stop pursuing me." He threw the towel into a corner and went in search of clean clothes.

"I only suggested we take a shower together."

The drawer banged shut. "It's more than that," he muttered. "You won't let it drop, will you? I'm doing my best."

"I didn't say I blamed you, Lion-O. We always knew it was going to be difficult to find them."

"Well, they've had quite a head start on us, haven't they?"

There it was again. The snide remarks, making her feel small and placing responsibility solely on her shoulders. "It's not my fault," she protested. "I thought they were dead. I was just as shocked as you to see those capsules on that island in one piece."

Lion-O pulled his top over his head and faced her. "I understand that," he said. "But frankly, Felina, I have to wonder what else you aren't telling me."

"What?" she said, surprised at his accusation. "I've told you everything."

"Have you?" he grumbled, again turning his back on her. "Like I say, I wonder."

"What's that supposed to mean?" she said angrily, coming round in front of him.

"It means that I thought I could trust you. We are married, after all."

"Allegedly."

He shot her a sharp look. "I can't make this work if you're constantly pulling in the opposite direction."

The accusation made her mouth drop open. "*Me?*"

"You keep secrets from me. How am I ever to know when you're telling the truth?" He turned from her, and Felina was shocked at what he muttered next. "Maybe you've got a bit too much of your mother in you."

"That's not fair. I'm not my mother, in fact, I never knew her," she retorted, resenting entirely the implication that she was capable of the deception her mother had been. "I thought they were dead, Lion-O. I told you everything I knew."

"Only because you were on the verge of being found out," he said. "And then you chose to embarrass me in front of my friends. Sounds like history repeating itself to me."

Felina was astounded. She saw no such parallels between this and the mess that surrounded her mother's tenure among the Thundercats. She found herself wishing Lion-O had never brought that stupid box of letters back from the flagship's wreckage – not if he was going to use someone else's dirty laundry against her. "They're my friends, too! How d'you think I felt?"

"It's bad enough that this is an awkward situation anyway," he went on, disregarding her growing distress. "We're constantly under scrutiny. 'Are they getting along? Are they having cubs yet?'"

Felina regarded him with a fierce scowl. "You've been no picnic to try to get close to, you know. Not only am I under the same pressure, as you seem to like to forget, but you're always storming around here sulking about everything as if everything is your burden to bear. We're supposed to be a team – all of us – but most of all, you and me."

"Well, everyone knows now, don't they? We're as distant as the hills of Elfshima. Why did you lie to me when I asked you back on the island about the others on your ship?"

"Because..." She wrung her hands, suddenly feeling like a naughty school cub caught out by the teacher. "Because I was ashamed that I had not said anything before." She squirmed under his gaze until she finally plucked up the courage to meet his eyes. "I'm sorry."

His answer was a discouraging grunt and another view of his back.

"I did tell you everything I knew, Lion-O," she insisted, trying to provoke any kind of response from him.

When no response was forthcoming, and even though it was against her better judgment, she couldn't help adding a dig prompted by something that had been bothering her since right before Bela's death. Besides, he'd already made the argument personal by bringing up her mother.

“You’re a fine one to talk about honesty. At least I haven’t pretended to be interested in something I wasn’t in order to manipulate somebody.”

Lion-O glowered at her. “What?”

“You’d like to forget, I’m sure, but when we were going to Castle Plundarr to rescue Panthro and Jax, you told me you were only suffering through my language lessons and Book studies to get me back into the habit. I thought it was odd that even Snarf was amazed at how suddenly interested you were in academia. I should have known.”

He shook his head and sighed heavily. “I never said it like that.”

“That was the implication. Did you start sleeping with me with an agenda in mind as well?”

Lion-O ran his fingers through his damp hair in frustration. “Okay, we have jobs to do, Felina. Neither of us has a choice, but like it or not, we have responsibilities. So yes, I did what I had to do to get you to stop burying your head in the sand and do your part. Is that what you want to hear?”

She couldn’t stop them. Tears began to fall. “There are a lot of things I’d like to hear.”

“Like what?” Lion-O asked, throwing his hands up in frustration. “Am I now expected to read your mind, Felina?”

She groaned to express her own frustration. “If I have to tell you what to say, what is the point?”

Was he just not aware he had yet to tell her that he loves her, or was it just something he didn’t feel so it went unsaid? Either way, if she had to point that out, it gained her nothing. If only he knew how much mileage he could get out of three simple words. Of course, she had yet to do the same, but her reluctance lie in the fear of his response – or rather, a lack of one. The way he acted toward her sometimes made her wonder if she should ever risk taking the initiative on that front.

He was right that this argument was about so much more than her hesitation to tell of the survivors on the journey from Thundera with her. It seemed all their pent-up frustrations with each other were coming out right along with it.

He’d run out of patience for the conversation they’d derailed into and held up a hand to signify it. “You know what, let’s not do this now. Let’s get back to the pressing matter at hand – the missing Thunderians,” he replied. “Who were they, Felina? Where did they come from?”

“I told you their names.”

“I mean, were they nobles, artisans, tradesmen?”

"What does it matter?" she said, the tears increasing their flow and the sight of them only seemed to aggravate Lion-O more. "They saved me, that's all I know."

"It *matters*," he said. "If we can determine what skills or training they had, we could get some idea where they might have gone."

"I don't know!" she cried. "It all happened so fast, and we weren't on the ship together long before we were all put into stasis."

Lion-O shook his head, smiling ironically. "You've got an answer for everything. Except what we actually need the answers to."

Lion-O angry was infinitely worse than Lion-O ignoring her. She had no answers to his demands, and he saw fit to heap on the guilt. She had been but a child at the time, frightened and grateful that someone had appeared to save her from a fiery death on Thundera. They had been kind and that was all she knew about them. She had racked her brains for hours, trying to remember some extra scrap of information, and still had only been able to tell the others that one, Lynx-O, had been old, at least to her young eyes, while Pumyra and Bengali had been much younger. And then suddenly a stray memory rose up and gave her something to tell him.

"They weren't Thundercats," she said. "I remember. Jagget - he was the pilot - said: "This one is a Thundercat", meaning me. That means the others weren't."

"Well, that discounts one per cent of the population," came Lion-O's discouraging reply as he headed back into the bathroom.

Felina stared at the empty doorway, willing him to return in a more reasonable frame of mind. She was trying her best and still it was not good enough for him. What did he want from her? Not affection obviously. He rebuffed her at every turn and his anger would only serve to drive them further apart. The look on his face when he re-emerged from the bathroom did nothing to reassure her that his mood had improved and frankly his glib attitude was starting to get on her nerves.

"You aren't so perfect yourself," she remarked pointedly, wishing to shift the attacks from her and give him another taste. He looked slightly taken aback at that. "You talk about wanting to make this marriage work, but you make no effort, Lion-O."

"I *try*," he countered.

"Try to avoid me, you mean," she said with an annoyed snort. "All that interest you feigned in learning our language, it was just lies, wasn't it? I was actually foolish enough to think it was drawing us closer – that you actually enjoyed spending time with me and learning with me. Turns out the only knowledge you ever truly consult with me for is the carnal variety."

Lion-O sighed as it was clear Felina was not going to let it go. "You're blowing everything way out of proportion. I'm a warrior, Felina, not a scholar."

"Other people manage to combine the two!"

The look of indignation that came to his face gave Felina a certain degree of satisfaction, until he recovered enough to make a particularly stinging rejoinder. "You're one to talk," he said with cool evenness.

Felina gasped. "At least I was trying to learn to be a better fighter for the right reasons."

They were getting nowhere trying to one-up one another with hurtful remarks, and that last one stung more than anything he'd said so far. Mocking her genuine, if somewhat failed, efforts to be better able to defend herself was devastating to her. She had never felt quite so hurt and alone. Her childhood was gone, Bela was gone, and she was married to someone who was a virtual stranger, who could not or would not reciprocate her love. And he had the audacity to accuse her of not making the effort. He, whose only grand gesture so far turned out to be a sham that he wasn't actually denying.

For now, all the anxiety and frustration from the last year was coming to the surface and she was well within danger of saying more things she may later regret. Emotions were running high and she simply wanted to strike back.

Before she could recover and pursue her line of attack, they were interrupted by the sound of someone knocking on the door. Lion-O called to whoever it was to enter, a welcome diversion for him, Felina imagined, from the heat of the argument. The door opened and Tygra appeared. A quick look from one angry face to another told him enough to make his entry slightly cautious.

"Sorry, am I interrupting?" he said.

"No, you're right on time!" Felina said, going over to him and taking him by the arm. His appearance sparked a fine idea. "You're interested in Thunderian history and culture, aren't you, Tygra?" He barely had time to reply before she went on. "Good, because I'm looking for an able and intelligent person with whom I can share my vast knowledge. I would like that to be you."

Since Lion-O was less than genuinely interested, Tygra was the perfect one among them to pass the Book's knowledge on to – someone who would actually appreciate it and enjoy the process of learning and discovery. She certainly wouldn't want to waste any more of her lord's precious time on it. The same could be said of her affection. Felina resolved to busy herself to keep her mind off the fact that she was in an awkward, loveless marriage and having real intellectual conversations with Tygra would be a good start. She'd be lying to herself if she didn't admit she also hoped the move somehow irritated Lion-O, given he never did seem to like her spending too much time with Tygra.

"Well..." He cast a wary glance at a thunderous Lion-O. "I don't really think I have the time, Felina."

"Of course you do," she assured him. "You're a master at doing more than one thing, unlike some people I know. I can arrange lessons to suit your schedule. With so few of us left, it would

be a good idea to have more than one of us learning the Book and keeping the old language alive. It was almost lost once, and it was only lucky my mother was found who had some knowledge of the old tongue. You are an ideal candidate, I believe. So, you'll do it?" She beamed at him. "I can count on you, can't I, Tygra?"

His doubts washed away. "Put like that, how can I refuse? But I thought that you, Lion-O, were--"

"I've got more important things to do than learn a dead language," he said tersely. "Excuse me, I've got to find our missing countrymen."

"Ah, that's what I wanted to see you about," said Tygra, extracting his arm from Felina's grasp. "I've just been having a discussion with Panthro about speeding up the construction of the Feliner. With a few design changes, we reckon we can have it completed in a couple of weeks."

"Airborne scanning would make the search a lot easier," agreed Lion-O.

"Just one problem," said Tygra. "It would mean double shifts and consequently less time for searching."

Lion-O considered. "All right. What time we lose now we can soon make up when the Feliner is complete. When do you want to start?"

"I've a few modifications to make to the plans, so tomorrow?"

"Fair enough. Until then, I'm going over to the Treetop Kingdom to see if Willa has heard any news."

"And I'm going to stay here and help Tygra," Felina announced. "Each to what they know best," she added, giving Lion-O a pointed look.

"Fine, do that."

The remark was a touch sharper than he had wanted, for he hesitated, then made up his mind and headed out of the room. Felina glared at his departing back and only remembered the other occupant of the room when Tygra coughed.

"Felina, about these lessons..."

"It's all right, we don't have to start straight away."

"You were serious then?"

She nodded firmly. "You're a natural scholar, Tygra. I'd be pleased to have you study with me."

"And I'm very honoured you think that," he said. "What about Lion-O?"

"Lion-O's a warrior, not a scholar," she said, using his own words to damn him with a certain degree of relish. "Now, can I help you with those designs?" He thanked her for the offer but declined. "Then I'm going to spend some time with my books," she said. "You know where I am if you need me."

A gentle push gave him the cue to leave.

Well, if Lion-O really believed they were so distant and it was all her fault, then fair enough, Felina decided. She'd start by not spending one more moment sharing a bedchamber with him. She gathered what few articles of her own that were in the room, and carried them next door to her original room, which was more or less as she'd left it before getting cozy with Lion-O. Whatever comfort she got from not sleeping alone after Bela's departure was certainly dashed now.

The scholars of old worked alone, isolated and undetected unless consulted to impart their knowledge. While she realized in this circumstance that wouldn't be entirely possible, she would no longer dally in her studies, or interject herself too much socially with the others. No, he'd never have to concern himself as to whether she was competent to do her job. She'd do it and do it well. Felina grabbed an old volume and sat on the bed, soon getting lost in the pages of history.



Cheetara encountered Tygra standing in the middle of the corridor just outside Lion-O and Felina's room. He had a slightly bewildered expression on his face, as though he was having trouble remembering where he was or what he was doing. Cheetara smiled to herself. She knew what that felt like after a sleepless night when Velouria denied her rest.

"Are you all right?" she said, gently touching his arm.

He snapped back to reality with a start. "Oh, what?"

"You look a little spaced out."

He looked as if he was about to agree with her when he changed his mind. "Cheetara, would you say I'm a natural scholar?"

Not quite what she expected, but she played along. "Well, yes. Velouria has a very clever father."

A knowing smile lifted the corners of his mouth. "And a very beautiful mother. How is Velouria?"

"She's sleeping. She was a little grumbly earlier."

"Grumbly I can cope with," he said.

She knew exactly what he meant. Only a few days before, Velouria had been desperately ill and, during what seemed like the longest night of her life, she had watched as her tiny daughter had battled the illness that sent her little body into fits and chilled her to the very core. If Tygra had not been there, she was sure she would have gone mad with worry. But with his care and her own strong constitution, Velouria had pulled through, much to everyone's relief and, seemingly, without any lasting ill effects. For her own part, Cheetara was still feeling frayed from the experience and she could see that Tygra was also strained.

"I think you need a rest," she said, taking his arm and leading him in the direction of their room. "How did it go with the Tuskas? Did they have any information about the survivors?"

Tygra shook his head. "Nothing. It's discouraging, Cheetara. I'm starting to think they didn't make it very far off that island."

"You didn't put this theory of yours to Lion-O, did you?"

"Of course not. He's taking it pretty badly anyway."

"You don't say," said Cheetara. "He's like a Mutant with a sore head."

"You've noticed that too? Well, his mood hasn't improved. I think he's just had an argument with Felina."

Cheetara frowned. "Yes, I thought I heard raised voices."

"I wish I had," he said ruefully. "I knew something was up when I walked into their room. Now Felina wants to teach me everything she knows."

"Lucky you."

"Cheetara, I'm being serious. I don't think Lion-O was very happy about it."

She smiled to herself. "I imagine that was exactly what Felina had in mind."

"You mean she wanted to get back at him?" The light dawned. "In that case, perhaps I should have refused her offer."

"Of course not. I'm sure she meant it. You are a natural scholar and it does make more sense that you also share the knowledge of the Book. Nothing against Lion-O, but you remember

how he was back on Thundera when it came to school. Not to mention you are next in line to be Lord if there's no heirs," she pointed out.

Tygra sighed. "They keep fighting like that, I may very well be the next Lord of the Thundercats."

"At any rate, I'm sure irking Lion-O was just a pleasant side effect for Felina," Cheetara assured him. "I think it's a good idea otherwise. She looks up to you and it'll benefit us all."

"Jealousy is beneficial?" Tygra wondered with an arched brow.

Cheetara chuckled. "Okay, it might not be beneficial for all of us at first. But he'll get over it. I'm certainly not concerned about it in that regard."

Tygra smiled at her. Indeed, he could imagine no greater love in his life, so Cheetara had nothing to fear or be jealous about. Well, maybe one other girl inspired a love that surpassed his love for Cheetara – a little bundle they named Velouria. Somehow Tygra could imagine Cheetara being okay with that, too. He simply didn't want to make the awkward situation with Lion-O and Felina worse. He'd have to think about it more and weigh the benefits.

They had reached their room and Cheetara activated the door control, neither of them noticing Felina slipping out of Lion-O's room and darting into her own. Cheetara was about to enter, but she felt Tygra's reluctance. "Just have a little rest," she said. "You'll feel much better."

"I can't," he said. "Duty calls."

"Then can I at least have a moment of your time?" He followed her in and waited with a patient expression on his face for her to explain. "It troubled me, Tygra, that I couldn't reach you when you were missing."

"We've discussed that. It's because I was unconscious for such a long time and you were upset."

She looked unconvinced. "Or my powers are waning."

"No, don't be silly."

"I'm serious, Tygra. I'm not getting any younger and Velouria's birth was a strain. I'm not complaining, but I'm wondering if my sixth sense is suffering as a result. If that's true, then I want to make the most of my psychic powers while I'm still able. I want to try to find the missing Thunderians."

Tygra sighed. "Cheetara, it tires you too much and--"

She held up a hand. "I know, but I want to try. If they are out there, we need to find them. Two couples aren't enough to ensure our survival, especially now I can't have any more children."

He went to her and took her in his arms. "I'll worry, you know that, but if this is what you want to do, I'll support you every step of the way."

She smiled up at him. "Thank you. I thought you might object." She paused and drew in a deep breath. "I don't want Velouria to grow up alone. Can you understand that?"

He nodded. "Promise me you'll wait until Lion-O gets back before you try, just in case..."

"Nothing will go wrong," she said, playfully tapping him on the nose. "Don't worry so. Now hadn't you better go?"

He tightened his grip around her waist. "You could persuade me to stay."

"I thought you had work to do."

"It'll keep for a little while," he said with a smile. "Unless you're busy with other things?"

She reached up and kissed him. "Only with you, my love."



Panthro was sure he could hear a knocking coming from the Thundertank's driveshaft, but Lion-O had yet to let up in his tirade long enough for him to confirm his suspicion that something was coming loose. A little way into their journey, he noticed Lion-O had seemed rather tense and ventured to ask him what was the matter. Now he was sorry.

"And she had the nerve to say I wasn't perfect," Lion-O was saying. "I never said I was. I don't understand her at all!"

Panthro cleared his throat and decided it high time to offer some advice. "Listen, Lion-O, ask me about a problem with a gearbox and I know what you're talking about. But women - they're a mystery to me."

"And me," Lion-O grumbled. "She's so unreasonable. According to her, everything's my fault. It's not me who's to blame!"

"Sure?"

Lion-O glanced over at him and sighed. "All right, maybe I am, some of the time. But she's not perfect."

Panthro chuckled. "Isn't that what she said about you?"

Lion-O managed a small laugh in spite of his anger. "Sounds silly, doesn't it?"

"Not really. Every married couple I know have arguments like that."

"Did you?" The mood in the Thundertank suddenly dropped a few degrees. "Sorry, I shouldn't have said anything."

"No, it's all right," said Panthro, his voice a little hoarse. "Tygra told you, I suppose."

"He did mention something about it."

"Well, then, yes, we did argue, sometimes over more silly things than that." A warm memory brought a grin to his face. "Tell you what though, making up was the best part."

"You think I should apologize?"

"Most definitely." The treetop homes of the Warrior Maidens were coming into sight and Panthro slowed the Thundertank's speed as they entered the glade. "All you have to do is say sorry, Lion-O. It's just one little word, but it makes all the difference."

The Thundertank ground to a halt and growled into silence. From the base of one of larger trees, Willa and sister, Nayda, had left their archery practice and were making their way over towards them. "Let's hope they've got good news," said Panthro. "We're about due for a break."

"Greetings, Thundercats," said Willa. "What brings you here?"

"Just wondering if you'd heard anything from the other tribes about our missing Thunderians."

Willa looked over her shoulder and called to one of her warriors. "Arilla, you were on guard duty. Did the bird return?"

A slightly stocky woman with a long black ponytail broke from the crowd of archers and came over to where the Thundercats stood. There was something about her piercing dark eyes and the way she regarded the two visitors to her village that made Panthro feel uncomfortable in her presence. "No, Willa," she answered her leader.

"We should have heard something by now," said Willa with a sigh, "if we were going to at all." Seeing Lion-O's puzzled expression, she went on. "Our relations with the other tribes are turbulent at best. They have... many strange ways."

Panthro took a moment to wonder how much stranger they would have to be for Willa to think them out of the usual. Her own situation was hardly what he would have described as normal. He had yet to see any male warriors, yet somehow children kept appearing. That was a puzzle that on reflection he decided he probably did not want to solve anyway.

"But all is not lost," Willa was saying when he returned his concentration to their conversation. "Perhaps a message has arrived in the last few minutes. Come, Lion-O, we will go and see."

She gestured for him to follow and dutifully Lion-O set off after her. Panthro folded his arms and leant against the side of the tank, making himself comfortable for a lengthy wait. He could have been at ease had not Nayda decided to linger. She stood some little distance from him, glancing over at him every now and again to smile shyly. After the fifth time it happened, he decided it was time to find out what she wanted.

"Everything all right here?" he said gruffly.

Nayda eagerly jumped on the question and took it as an invitation to join him on the Thundertank. She positioned herself just a little too close and tried not to look up at him. "Fine. Actually, it's all been rather quiet." Silence. Worse, an awkward silence, when Panthro thought he should be saying something and not knowing quite what. To his relief, Nayda took up the gauntlet. "Glad to see you've recovered. Since last time I saw you, I mean."

"Oh, yeah, I'm fine now. Thanks."

Silence again that seemed to stretch into forever. "You manage well," she said suddenly. "With your leg. You don't seem to let it slow you down."

"Can't afford to," he said. "We've too much else to worry about."

She nodded and thoughtfully chewed on her lip. "The Mutants are a pain, aren't they? They're always harassing our hunting parties and stealing our food."

"Yes, I'm sorry about that."

"Oh, it's not your fault. If it wasn't them, it would be someone else. Better the devil you know." She gave him an encouraging smile. "They don't bother you though."

He snorted. "What makes you think that? They broke into the Lair a few months back. Still don't know how. We figured Grune gave them some insider information, given that Tygra based the specifications on the old Lair on Thundera. So, we've given the security systems a tweak. They won't be getting in that way again." He shot Nayda a look of confidence, only to see that her eyes were fixed on something behind them.

"It's all right, Arilla," she said. "You can go back to archery practice." The woman slightly inclined her head and wandered back to the main group. Nayda watched her go with pursed lips. "I don't like her," she confided. "She's always skulking about. She gives me the creeps."

"Is she trouble?"

Nayda shrugged. "It's nothing she says or does, but all the same I've got a bad feeling about her."

Panthro followed her gaze to the back view of the departing woman. Suddenly alerted to the attention she had attracted, Arilla looked back over her shoulder and grinned at him. Those dark eyes locked with his and for some strange reason Panthro felt a chill run down his spine. Arilla moved on and walked past Willa and Lion-O, who were returning to the Thundertank.

"No luck," said Lion-O in answer to Panthro's question.

"I guess we'll just have to keep waiting and hope that bird finds his way home."

"Perhaps." Lion-O glanced up at the darkening sky. "Speaking of which, we should be getting back. Thanks, Willa."

"Tomorrow night, we're having our annual Treetop Festival," Willa added. "I know you're all quite busy and concerned with your missing countrymen, but I'll extend the invitation just the same. We've never invited outsiders, but we're making an exception in this case."

The two Thundercats nodded. "I can't promise anything," Lion-O conceded. "But thank you."

"If we hear anything, I'll bring the news straight to the Lair," said Nayda, ignoring her sister's curious look.

"That was nice of her," Lion-O remarked as Panthro turned the Thundertank for home.

"She's a nice girl," said Panthro. "Very thoughtful and considerate."

"That, too."

Panthro opened his mouth to ask him what he meant, but Lion-O had already looked away and was staring out of the side window. Pushing the remark to the back of his mind, Panthro gunned the engines and concentrated on navigating between the thick clumps of trees.



Night fell at the Lair, and Lion-O hadn't run into Felina since he and Panthro returned from the Treetop Kingdom. He decided it was time to seek her out and do as Panthro suggested. Besides, he planned to use the Book and the sword soon, impatient for word on the missing Thunderians, and if anything should happen he didn't want to leave things between them as it had transpired earlier in the day. He'd been harsh with her, and for that he truly felt bad.

Lion-O finally found her when he stepped into her old room, the chamber shrouded in the dark of night. But by the light pouring in from the hallway through the open door he stood framed within, he could see a lone figure curled up as if sleeping, on the bed in the centre of the room.

Once he stepped inside, the door slid shut behind him and he could only see by the light of the moon coming in through the window. He padded across the room, his eyes scanning his surroundings. Lion-O noted she'd returned all her belongings to this room and he deduced what the implications were. He supposed he couldn't blame her.

Making his way to the bed, he stood there for a moment studying her. Felina was on her side with her back to him on top of the covers, still dressed in her clothes, with a book beside her lying open and face down. But he could tell by her breaths and movement under her eyelids that she was not sound asleep. He smiled a little at the lengths she was going to in an effort to ignore him.

Lion-O carefully slid onto the bed beside her and hesitated before lightly touching her upper arm. The contact made her flinch.

"Felina, I know you're not asleep," Lion-O said softly. "I'm sorry about what happened earlier."

She twisted onto her back and gazed up at him. "Are you?"

"I said some things which I regret. I didn't mean any of it. I was angry and frustrated and... I took it out on you. I'm sorry."

She looked into his eyes for a long moment and managed a slight smile for him. "I'm as much to blame as you. You're right. I should have told you sooner. I really did think they were dead."

"It wouldn't have made any difference."

He was glad she was accepting of his apology and no longer in the mood to argue. He wanted to get along, to make their marriage work. He was just so often overwhelmed with everything else it was difficult. And he meant what he told Panthro – girls were a mystery to him. He had lost his mother at a young age, and there hadn't been many female figures in his life growing up. And of course, he hadn't had a girlfriend before coming to Third Earth and chancing into Felina again, both of them having the marriage sprung on them. Therefore, Lion-O had no prior experiences to learn from and no real sense of what a woman really wants romantically from a man. He cared about her, as he did all his friends, and he hoped she realized that by his actions. But she seemed to want more from him. It didn't seem to be much of a recipe for success, but he figured he could at least try his best to make the most of it. This apology was a start.

"We'll find them," she reassured him. He reached over and gently moved a stray wisp of her hair out of her face. "Did Willa give you any leads?"

"She's still waiting for a reply to the message she sent. But I'm tired of waiting," he said determinedly. "I'm going to consult the Guardian and I'm going to do it right now." He was out of the bed before she could stop him. "Coming?"

He looked over his shoulder at her, as she sprang into an upright position in reaction to his announcement. He waited for her protests, noting her look of alarm.

"Don't get mad," she began.

Lion-O grimaced, wondering what surprise she was going to spring on him now. "What now?"

She got up and positioned herself between him and the door. "Listen, something you said earlier today about the Guardian's warning got me thinking about how much we've used the Book lately—"

"I know it's not supposed to be a cure-all," Lion-O interrupted, "but I'm running out of options here."

"Let me finish," she urged patiently. "That spell I cast at Mumm-Ra's pyramid – it was a powerful one - one of the most powerful besides a Lifting of the Dead. Neither one has really been attempted before in the past, and for good reason I'm coming to find out."

His concern grew as he thought back to that time, the Pyramid crumbling around them and the heavy blocks uncaring whether or not they landed on friend or foe. He wondered where she was going with all this but decided to just be quiet and let her explain.

"I'm starting to think it is having lasting impressions on how we use the Book and how frequently we access its power. I wish I'd never been so careless." She looked him directly in the eye as she finished her point, and Lion-O could see the worry in her eyes. "The risks of doing what you're suggesting now may be greater than what was originally estimated. I'm sorry."

She looked at him warily, as if anticipating another sharp lecture. However, Lion-O felt no such ire at the announcement for most of his sour mood from earlier had been shaken off, so he saw her mistake for what it was – a mistake. Her concern was touching, but he still felt there was little other choice. Every hour that went by was critical while those Thunderians were out there wandering Jaga-knows-where. He laid his hands gently on her shoulders.

"I have to do this," he told her gently. "It'll be okay. You did what you thought was best at the time," he added for her benefit, for he had no way of knowing this as a certainty.

To his surprise, she rose up on her toes and touched her lips to his. He welcomed the gesture, gathering her up in his arms and holding her close as the kiss deepened. His thoughts were quickly becoming passionate in nature, and if it wasn't for the pressing business at hand, he'd have gladly carried her over to the bed and fully indulged in this making-up process.

Instead he reluctantly broke off the kiss and relinquished his hold on her. "Let's go," he said huskily.

He was very aware of her presence as she followed him closely on the way to the Sword Chamber even though no words passed between them. He could sense her nervousness and he tried not to let it intensify his own.

They soon arrived in the room, and he turned to face her.

"Do you have the Key?" he said, holding out his hand.

She kept a firm hold on it. "Have you tried the Sword of Omens?"

He nodded and took note of her continuing resistance to let him go. He almost thought to question it, as if she once again was holding back information but quickly thought better of it. "It showed me nothing, just a misty blue haze."

"Then doesn't that mean they're... you know."

"Not necessarily," he replied, catching the gist of what she found too terrible to finish saying. "Magnetic fields disrupt the Sword's powers, as does the proximity of Thundranium, as we already know. I'm hoping using the Book and Sword in conjunction will overcome that."

Felina hesitated, then handed him the Key. "Be careful."

He smiled at her. "You know I will."

Grasping the Sword, he raised it before his eyes. A blue aura surrounded him and Felina backed away, anticipating the moment when he would be swept into the Book. Except this time the light crackled with a fierce white energy and Lion-O was thrown across the room. The Sword spun wildly in the air before clattering to the floor. The Eye of Thundera glowed intensely and then closed with an annoyed growl.

Next thing Lion-O knew, Felina was at his dazed but otherwise uninjured side. He tried not to react badly as the realization that another failure had just been heaped upon them sank in.

As Felina was helping him to his feet, through the door came Cheetara and Tygra, both looking anxious.

"We heard a noise," said Tygra breathlessly. "What happened?"

"I tried to use the Book and Sword to show me where the missing Thunderians are," Lion-O explained. "Something happened, like it was trying to show me and then there was a discharge of energy."

"He took a bit of tumble," Felina added. "You are all right, aren't you?"

"Yes, fine," said Lion-O. "Just a bit shaken, that's all."

"You're no closer to finding them?" Cheetara asked. When Lion-O replied in the negative, he noticed the look that passed between the cheetah and her mate. "Lion-O, I want to try to find them using my sixth sense," she said. He began to protest, but she continued. "I know the risks. In order to induce a trance, I must take myself to the very brink of oblivion. I'm prepared. I can do this."

Lion-O looked from Cheetara to Tygra and tried to find an ally for his concerns. "Are you happy with this?" he asked him.

Tygra gave a slight shrug. "Whether I'm happy or not, she'll do it anyway."

"Cheetara, are you really sure about this?" Lion-O said. "I know I've been a bit crazy lately about trying to find them, but I don't expect anyone to risk their sanity or their lives over it."

"Our numbers are few," said Cheetara. "If we are the last of Thundera – and it's a reasonable assumption to make given what the Mutants did to our fleet alone - then we must stand together against the evil that would see us driven from this world or destroyed utterly. But more than that, I am a Thundercat. It is my duty to help those who cannot help themselves. That is the promise I made when I was given this insignia. If our countrymen are in trouble, then I must do all I can to help them."

After a long moment, Lion-O had to concede. She made a good point and he had to admit to himself that he should try being a little less concerned about his own lot in life and think of the big picture more often. "Put like that," he said, "how can I stand in your way?"

"You can't," she said with a smile. "Very well, everyone stand back."

They fell back as instructed and, after taking a deep breath, she started to spin. Round and round, so fast that nobody could follow her progress with their eyes, until Cheetara was a just blur of yellow surrounded by an eerie blue aura. Then, suddenly she stopped. Her outstretched arms fell by her sides and her eyelids flew open. Her gaze seemed to be fixed on the far wall, but her focus was far beyond the confines of the small room.

"I see three suspension capsules," she said in faraway voice. "Falling, falling down to earth. I see an island growing ever larger and three survivors on a wide beach. They are building a raft and travelling on the waves to a distant shore."

"Where?" prompted Lion-O, but Tygra put a finger to his lips and indicated to him to be silent.

"Red rocks and large mountains rise up to the sky. It's hot and I feel so weak. Cannot move, cannot fight." She let out a small gasp. "I see no more," she said, and her legs buckled beneath her. Tygra caught her before she fell, and he gently lowered her to the ground.

"They're alive," she said, rubbing her brow. "I'm sorry I wasn't more help. I just felt so exhausted, like all my energy was being drained away."

"By the stress of the trance?" Tygra asked.

"No, by my surroundings."

"Thundranium," Lion-O said, tight-lipped. "No wonder the combined powers of the Sword and the Book were being blocked. Makes life that much harder."

"Shouldn't it make it easier?" said Felina. "There can't be many places on Third Earth where there are red rocks and mountains and Thundranium."

"Except we have no shield to block out the effects," Tygra explained. "We can pin down where they might be, but it's still going to be difficult to locate them within that area. And even then, there's no saying we'll be looking in the right place."

"But at least it's a start. There can't be too many places on Third Earth with enough Thundranium to do that to the Sword," said Lion-O. "And that's a whole lot better than we had before. I think our chances of finding them have just improved!"

"If they're still in that area," Cheetara added with a shudder, "we better be quick about it. Thundercats or not, that stuff is not anything a Thunderian can endure for too long."

Lion-O noticed Felina's frown increase in severity. "What's wrong?"

"I was just thinking...if that stuff makes them as weak as it does us, then why would they go that near to it? Unless --"

"Unless they're being forced there by someone or something," Tygra grimly finished for her.

It was all that made sense, for any Thunderian with half a wit about them would steer clear of such a place well before the weakening effects crippled them.

Lion-O's relief at getting somewhere was quickly replaced by a shock of fear. He knew the Mutants and Mumm-Ra both had ways of finding out what they were up to, and what's more the Mutants had been to the island, too. What if they also saw the wreckage and were on the trail of the lost Thunderians? He knew it would not set well with their enemies to increase their numbers.

"We've no time to waste," Lion-O announced, and started to advance past the others toward the door.

Tygra put a stop to it. "Rushing off in haste isn't going to help them. If it is a trap or there's some other unforeseen danger, all you'll accomplish even if you find this place is getting yourself in the same sticky situation."

“What do you suggest?” Felina asked, clearly appreciative to Tygra’s council and hanging on his every word, none of which went unnoticed by Lion-O. If only she paid half as much heed to him, he thought with measured annoyance.

“Well,” Tygra began while still giving Cheetara some added support after her draining vision. “We should finish the Feliner first as originally agreed. A mountain will be infinitely easier to spot from the air. Plus, we can survey the surroundings of the landscape from a safer distance from the Thundranium. Secondly, I can try to come up with something that might help us block some of the effects of Thundranium. You could work on that too, Felina – see if there’s anything in the Book that advises on the subject. Somehow, Grune had managed to make himself immune to the effects of the mineral, and if he could do it, I’m sure we could mimic that. In the meantime, the rest of us can ask around to our friends once again and try to find out anything we can about the location.”

Lion-O had to admit he made good points, thinking back to Grune’s astral battle with Jaga and how he’d almost bested him thanks to a club forged with the deadly mineral. Felina looked a bit mystified and he supposed he’d have to fill her in later. “The Warrior Maidens are having some sort of festival tomorrow that they invited us to. Maybe I will go after all and try to find out more about this location. That, and I’ll be there in case they get word back from the southern tribes. They still may know something valuable that could help.”

“You all should go,” Tygra suggested. “We’re also no help to the missing Thunderians if we run ourselves ragged.” He looked down upon Cheetara with fondness, squeezing her tightly to him. “Someone wise taught me that. I’ll do a shift on the Feliner tomorrow – I’ve got those plans to apply to it – but I think it would do everyone a world of good to take a few hours off and recharge. Let’s go into this with clear minds.”

“What about you?” Felina asked.

“I’ve got all the peace of mind I need right here,” he assured her while squeezing Cheetara close to him once more.

Lion-O noticed an odd look come over Felina’s face and her smile seemed forced. “Of course,” she said simply, although Lion-O sensed there was far more on her mind she wanted to give voice to. “I’ll leave everyone to their work then,” she continued as she gathered up the Book of Omens. “I’ll read up and see if there’s any useful information on Thundranium in here.”

Lion-O followed her as she exited the Sword Chamber without so much as glancing back at him. He had to quicken his steps to keep up with her brisk pace. She didn’t even slow down when he called out to her to wait up. Finally, he caught up to her near her room.

“Hey, what’s the matter? Didn’t you hear me back there?”

“I hear just fine,” she answered with a smile that was a little too sweet.

He studied her curiously, trying to figure out what was troubling her now. Surely it wasn't their earlier tiff. They'd sorted through that, or so he thought. "Is there something on your mind? Is there something I said?"

"Oh, I think you've pretty much said everything you're ever going to," she replied, still wearing that oddly sweet smile.

He leaned against the wall and scratched his head. He couldn't make heads or cat's tails out of what she was saying. "Is this about earlier...?"

Felina shrugged lightly. "You apologized. I accepted it. I've accepted all of it."

He still felt strongly she was being coy and playing some kind of game with him, and he didn't like it. She got far too much enjoyment out of making everything this elaborate puzzle for him to work through when all she had to do was just tell him what was on her mind. If she was looking to have another round, he didn't have the energy tonight. "Listen, we've both had a long, bad day. Let's just turn in and start fresh tomorrow. Forget this for now," he added, plucking the Book from her arms and coaxing her to follow him into his bedroom.

Just then, the Thunderkittens ran past, only pausing in their raucous fun to regard the couple with a few snickers. Lion-O cast them a look of mild annoyance.

"They certainly seem to be having fun," she remarked in wistful tones, watching the playful kittens disappear around a bend in the hall.

"We could have some fun, too," he said in a low voice, pulling her close to him. Lion-O suddenly wanted to finish what they started earlier. That he could find the energy for, as it really had been far too long for both of them.

But she was not in a like frame of mind, for she used her proximity to him to pluck the Book back from his clutches. "I have a job to do. In there," she added, indicating her own chamber. "If you need me, I'll be only slightly nearer than the Hills of Elfshima. Sleep well, *my lord*."

Lion-O grimaced, trying hard not to lose his temper again as he was sure the references and the emphasis of her words were designed to do. "I see. This is how it's going to be, is it?"

His words fell on deaf ears, for Felina was already fast disappearing behind the door of her bedchamber. A moment ago, she was kissing him and now he was getting nothing but the cold shoulder and definite vibes that she wasn't as over their fight as she claimed to be. He shook his head in frustration and muttered to himself about women and their maddening ways on his way to bed. If she held hopes he'd pursue her and beg at her feet, she had a lonely night in store. He'd apologized, and that was all she was going to get.

"So much for an apology making a difference," he grouched while shedding his clothes for bed. "What the--?"

His aggravation was multiplied when he went to slide into bed to find he could only get halfway in under the covers. Someone had short-sheeted his bed and he had a good idea who – a pair of smart alecks he knew had linen duty that day.

“WilyKit! WilyKat!” he shouted, noting two shadows visible in the light along the bottom of his chamber door that quickly fled amid muffled giggles.

He fell back onto the pillow and groaned.

*All men have secrets and here is mine so let it be known*

*We have been through hell and high tide*

*I can surely rely on you*

*And yet you start to recoil*

*Heavy words are so lightly thrown*

*But I'd still leap in front of a flying bullet for you*

*So what difference does it make?*

*It makes none, but now you have gone*

*And you must be looking very old tonight*

*The devil will find work for idle hands to do*

*I stole and I lied, and why? Because you asked me to*

*But now you make me feel so ashamed*

*Because I've only got two hands*

*Well, I'm still fond of you*

*So what difference does it make?*

*It makes none, but now you have gone*

*And your prejudice won't keep you warm tonight*

*Oh the devil will find work for idle hands to do*

*I stole and then I lied just because you asked me to*

*But now you know the truth about me*

*You won't see me anymore*

*Well, I'm still fond of you*

*But no more apologies*

*No more apologies*

*I'm too tired, I'm so very tired*

*And I'm feeling very sick and ill today*

*But I'm still fond of you*

*--What Difference Does It Make? – The Smiths*