

Chapter 22 of Signal in the Sky

Standing At The Gate

By Purrsia Kat & Spaced Angel

Felina threw open the closet doors and stared at the contents with a sinking feeling in her gut. What to wear? Row upon row of everyday clothes swung gently on their hangers. Fine for working or fighting Mutants, but hardly the sort of thing to wear on a special occasion. And according to Lion-O, this was a very special occasion. An invite to the Warrior Maidens' annual Treetop Festival had never been extended to outsiders before. That made it quite an honour and one that demanded best behaviour and best clothes. Panthro had already laid out the law to the Thunderkittens about their behaviour; now Felina needed someone to do the same for her where clothing was concerned.

She raked the line of tunics back and forth and met with uniform blandness. It was disheartening. She had nothing to wear. It was easy for the male Thundercats. At least they had the usual regulation suits. But what was she to do? She had to look her best. Her wardrobe was clearly not up to the challenge and it was too late to have something made. With a sigh, she resigned herself to her fate. While everyone looked smart, she would have to make do with what she usually wore. It would be too humiliating for words.

Not for the first time that afternoon, she wished she had not been so insistent about going to this festival. Mostly, it had been out of spite. An uncomfortable night with ill-fitting bed sheets after her rebuff had soured Lion-O's resolve to attend and he had made his reluctance all too clear at the morning council meeting. Just to spite him further, she had sided with Tygra in agreeing that they all needed a break. He still had some suffering to do before she was entirely ready to forgive him and seeing him squirm in the midst of the Warrior Maidens would go some way to his rehabilitation. There had been a certain satisfaction in seeing his face drop when the decision was carried that the Thundercats would all, with the exception of Tygra, who was staying to start work on the Feliner, be attending. It would be good for relations and good for them. It was obligatory and Lion-O was already dreading it.

And now so was she. Spite had its downside after all, she reflected miserably. She pulled out the least worn of her tunics and wondered what she could do to make a little more attractive. Some jewelry and a different belt might make all the difference. Then again, it would look exactly what it was - a pathetic attempt to make old clothes look new. There was only one thing to do. She would cry off with a headache.

Her decision made, she plopped onto her bed and opened a tome to study until someone came inquiring. It would look better, as she planned to make like she was lying in bed too miserable to report. With any luck, nobody would call until it was nearly time to go and she'd have the extra cushion of not having time to talk her into going anyway. However, it wasn't long

until Snarf came knocking, wanting to know if she needed any help getting ready. After several of his worried calls, Felina heaved herself off the bed and went to the door. Snarf was, in his own way, just as persistent and obstinate as Bela had been. At times like these, Felina realised just how much she missed the little snarf.

As expected, he had a concerned look on his face when she opened the door. He took in her appearance and frowned, for she was putting on quite a visual performance already.

"Are you all right?" he twittered.

Felina gave a half-hearted nod and tried her best to put on a pained expression. "Sorry if I worried you for not promptly getting the door, but I've got a headache," she said. "I think I'll stay here tonight."

Snarf gave an anxious purr. He eyed her with suspicion, trying to crane his neck to see around her into the room, and Felina knew he was no fool. She was skilled by her tenure with the Emities in a number of holistic remedies and she realized a bit too late how lame an excuse a headache really was. For someone with her skills, she should be the last one to suffer such a nuisance.

"But you have to come, snarf, snarf," he insisted. "Lion-O's going, so you have to. It's expected."

That sounded like the perfect reason not to go. Felina managed a weak smile and shook her head. "I don't feel well enough, Snarf," she said, sticking to her story come hell or high water. "I'm going back to bed now. Have a good evening."

She shut the door on him and, with a sigh of relief, leaned up against it. That had been easier than she had imagined just from her willingness to stick to her guns. Now all she had to do was convince the other Thundercats. They would not be so readily deceived and maybe even more vocal about questioning why she wouldn't just rid herself of the issue with a little herbal tea mixture. Panthro had little patience with illness and advocated working through pain in order to conquer it, besides. But she had resolved not to go and was determined that she would not be swayed.

She nurtured a faint hope that when news of her condition spread, Lion-O might actually be concerned enough to come and see if she was all right. It was about time he made good on some of those promises he had made her when he had apologised. There was even an outside chance that he might go the extra mile and be concerned enough to put his feelings for her into words. Though she knew it was stretching it to think a bothersome headache would cause such an outpouring of soft feelings and declarations to fall from his lips. For certain, she'd been far more gravely injured before without such results but she couldn't help herself but hope her fantasy of what love was meant to be would somehow grow between them despite all the logic and cynicism that nagged at her. Right now, however, she was happy to get any show of affection from him at all.

Before she could retreat back to her bed and her studies, a gentle knocking sounded on the door behind her. So it had begun. The others had come to see this mystery ailment for themselves. Well, she was prepared for them. She was ready to give the performance of her life. Snarf was just a warm-up.

She opened the door to find Cheetara standing there, with a glass of water in one hand and a bottle of pills in the other. Felina couldn't help but feel disappointed that it had not been Lion-O standing there instead. "Snarf said you were unwell," she said. "I wondered if a painkiller might help."

Felina shrugged. "I get headaches occasionally. I tend to sleep them off when the teas don't help," she added to cover her tail ahead of time. "Thanks, anyway."

"I see," Cheetara said thoughtfully. "This wouldn't be anything to do with the festival at the Treetop Kingdom tonight, would it?"

How on Thundera had she guessed, Felina wondered. Astounded by the cheetah's remark, her failure to reply brought a knowing smile to Cheetara's face.

"Thought so," she said, giving Felina a wink. "May I come in?"

Felina stood to one side to allow her to enter. Cheetara glanced about the room, taking note of the books scattered across the bed. She pushed several volumes aside and sat down, crossing her long legs and regarding Felina kindly.

"How did you know?" Felina asked.

Cheetara's smile broadened into a grin. "A headache is the most powerful weapon in a female's armoury. Besides," she added, "it's what I would have said if I didn't want to go."

"I was that obvious?"

"Slightly. Why the change of heart, Felina? You were very excited about going this morning."

"Yes, I was." Feeling worse than awkward under the cheetah's questioning gaze, she took herself out of her direct line of vision and sat on the bed beside her. "You see, Cheetara..."

"You only said it to get back at Lion-O?"

Felina stared at her in surprise. She had had a demonstration of Cheetara's powers yesterday, but she had no idea she could read people's minds as well. As she knew, there was no use denying it. "Partly," she said, looking down at the loose thread she was pulling from the hem of her tunic.

"You haven't forgiven him yet?"

"No. He said some things yesterday that really hurt, Cheetara. And then there's what he doesn't say." She could feel Cheetara's eyes upon her and resisted the temptation to look up. "I feel used."

"Have you told him how you feel?"

Felina shrugged. "I shouldn't have to. Is he so stupid that he can't see it for himself? Why can't he be more like--" She stopped herself, realising what she was on the verge of saying, and felt a warm blush spread across her cheeks.

"More like Tygra?" Cheetara calmly finished for her.

"Sorry, I didn't mean..."

"No, it's okay. I know we're lucky. But part of the reason why we get along so well is because we *do* talk things over. If he annoys me - and he does - I let him know. He's not a mind reader, nor am I." She smiled slightly. "Despite the impression you seem to have got about me."

Felina returned her smile. "I did wonder."

"Nothing to it. We can all feel the tension between you two, and we've all been young and in love as well. It's... sad to see you both at war."

She meant it, which only made Felina feel doubly bad. Everyone had such hopes and it was crumbling all around them. She had tried, but Lion-O was impossible. Perhaps some gentle words of wisdom from one of his older friends would make a difference. "You couldn't speak to him about it for me, could you?" she asked hopefully.

Cheetara shook her head. "This is something you and Lion-O have to work out for yourselves. I know it isn't easy. Relationships are hard work, particularly in your circumstances. That doesn't mean it can't work, however. In the normal course of things, you would have had time to discover that for yourselves, but you both lost your formative years in those damnable suspension capsules and so you're both still learning. No, as another woman, I can't tell Lion-O what you want from him. I can point him in the right direction if he asks me. We all would, but it has to come from him. Advice offered, however well meant, is not often happily accepted."

"I understand," said Felina. It made sense to her. She avoided coming right out with it for much the same reason. She wanted *him* to figure it out, and have the words come from his own heart when – if – they were spoken. "Thank you anyway."

Cheetara patted her on the knee. "Speak to him, Felina. At least give him a chance."

She nodded gratefully. "I will." There was something else that had been playing on her mind and as Cheetara had been so frank with her, she knew she owed it to her to pay her the same compliment. "About me teaching Tygra, do you mind?"

She looked mildly taken aback. "No, of course not. He's looking forward to it. Why?"

"I didn't know if you thought it was... inappropriate," she said, choosing her words carefully. "Lion-O isn't interested and I want to share my knowledge with someone else and I know Tygra was interested in my books before and--"

"Felina, it's all right," Cheetara said, hushing her babble.

"He would be my pupil, nothing more."

"I understand."

"You do?"

Cheetara nodded. "As long as you don't give him too much homework."

Felina smiled. "I'll try to remember that."

"Good. Now what about this party?" Cheetara said, getting to her feet. "Come with us. You might enjoy it."

"I would," Felina said, chewing nervously on her bottom lip. "But I've got a problem. I haven't anything to wear."

Cheetara frowned. "Well, that is a problem." She went to the wardrobe and spent several moments rummaging through the identical assortment of tunics until she came to a plastic wrapped garment hanging forlornly at the back. "What about this?" she said, taking it out and stripping back the covering.

Felina stared at it and shuddered. The passage of months had not dulled its wine colour nor the memories associated with it. The last time she felt that soft fabric up against her skin it had been on one of the most miserable days of her life, the day she was married. She remembered everyone telling her how beautiful she looked - everyone, except Lion-O. He had spent the day in a sullen huff and had pointedly ignored her. He had done his duty and married her with all the enthusiasm of the condemned. No, it was a dress with unhappy memories. She could not bear to wear it again.

"I can't wear that," she protested.

"Why not?" said Cheetara. "The cut was perfect and the colour suited you."

"Because..." She faltered, suddenly realising how silly she sounded. "Because I got married in it," she said in a quiet voice.

Cheetara sighed. "Well, unless you're planning to make a career out of weddings, it won't be much use to you again." She spread the luxurious fabric out across her hands and stared at it

thoughtfully. "Tell you what, we could alter it slightly." She smiled to herself. "And I have just the thing. Wait here."

She was gone before Felina could stop her and in an even shorter space of time she was back, with a roll of shimmering purple fabric in her hands. "The Berbils gave me this the first time we helped them with their harvest. It's something they make from a worm that lives on their fruit trees. Silk, I think they call it."

She unrolled it and silky waterfall of material cascaded to the floor. Felina caught it and felt its smooth coolness between finger and thumb. It wrapped itself about her arm and caressed her skin; soft and tantalising like the touch of a practised lover.

"It's lovely," she said. "But I can't accept this."

"It's no use to me," said Cheetara. "It isn't my colour. But with your dress..." She offered it up against the garment to show her what she meant. "Doesn't that look great?"

Felina had to agree. Against the muted glow of the velvet, the silk shone and gave the dress a different aspect. "Do we have time to alter it?"

Cheetara grinned. "Allow me to introduce my secret weapon on such occasions." She crept over to the door and opened it. Taken by surprise, Snarf tumbled into the room. He pushed himself up with as much dignity as he could muster and vehemently denied that he had been listening at the door. Just passing by he maintained.

"Yes, I saw you 'just passing by' out in the hall a moment ago," said Cheetara knowingly.

Snarf purred and puffed out his chest. "Brrr, I meant no harm, I'm sure."

Felina smiled a little, knowing the creature had probably overheard their entire conversation with those big floppy ears of his. But as usual, she was sure he only meant well, especially after her uneven performance earlier. How could he not be curious? She would have been tempted to do the same in the reverse case.

"Of course not, but now you're here," said Cheetara, "you can help me turn the Lady of Thundera into a princess for the evening. Are you up for it?"

He rubbed his hands together with glee. "Am I? Sure, or my name's not Os—erm, Snarf! I'll go and get my needlework box!" He scampered away, leaving Cheetara and Felina exchanging conspiratorial grins in his wake.

"Problem solved," said Cheetara. "Now, let's get you ready."

Felina, delighted by the assistance of her friends, was once more excited about the evening's events.



"That won't help, you know."

Lion-O paused in his relentless pacing to glare at the owner of the voice. "What's keeping them?"

Panthro shrugged. "Who can tell? I've never known a woman be ready on time. But, believe me, it's always worth the wait."

"Is it?" Lion-O grumbled and started again on his wanderings back and forth in front of the steps leading up to the Lair's main entrance. "We're already fifteen minutes behind schedule. It's bad enough that we have to go without being late, too."

"Willa said we could get there when it suited us," Panthro reminded him.

"And I said we would be there by sundown. At this rate..."

Lion-O pursed his lips and let the subject drop. There was no point in getting angry. They were late and nothing he could say or do would get back that lost time. Making a mental note to bring up the lax attitude to time keeping that seemed to be pervading the Lair lately at the next council meeting, he resumed his pacing and tried to weary his growing frustration. It made no difference and only seemed to get worse with each passing minute.

"This is ridiculous!" he said finally. "We can't wait any longer."

"Yes, we can," Panthro responded, calmly picking a few stray pieces of lint from the immaculate deep blue of his suit. "What does it matter if we're a couple of minutes late?"

"It matters to me," said Lion-O. "I gave my word that we would be there."

"And we will. Rushing everyone won't change the end result. Take a deep breath and calm down."

"Good advice if you can follow it."

Lion-O glanced over his shoulder and found that the bearer of these words of wisdom was Tygra, who was coming down the steps with Velouria in his arms. Inwardly, Lion-O allowed himself a guilty groan of dismay. A display of happy families was not what he needed right now, especially after Felina's attitude the night before. The morning meeting showed that her mood had not mellowed towards him and it was fast starting to irritate him. What on Thundera did she want from him? He had apologised and for any other normal person, that

should have been an end to it. But her withdrawal back to her own room showed that despite her claims of forgiveness she was clearly still sulking about something. And she had the temerity to call him childish.

"I'm always calm and easy-going," Panthro was saying when Lion-O dragged his attention back to the conversation. "When was the last time you saw me get in a state?"

"When WilyKit put her greasy fingers on the Thunder Tank's upholstery last week," Tygra replied matter-of-factly.

Panthro waved an airy hand. "That's different. That's about taking a pride in your work."

"I take a pride in keeping my word," countered Lion-O. "And I said we'd be on time. So, where are they?"

He directed his question to Tygra, who shrugged. "Cheetara was ready. I think she was helping Felina."

The mention of his wife's name made his blood boil. Felina! He should have known. He was ready to bet that she was doing it on purpose to annoy him, just like when she had insisted on going to this festival in the first place. Very well, he could play that game, too.

"We're leaving," he said decisively. "If they want to come, they can walk."

"Give them time," urged Tygra. "They'll be down in a minute."

"Haven't you got anything else to do?" Lion-O snapped, his patience finally fraying to a thin thread. "I thought you were meant to be working on the Feliner so that we get it airborne and find our missing countrymen. Which is what I should be doing instead of wasting time like this."

Tygra seemed unruffled by this display of anger. "It's all in hand, Lion-O. I've got a fuel feasibility study running right now. When that's done, I can make a start on modifying the engines." He shifted Velouria's weight in his arms and stuck his tongue out at the grinning baby. "And you're going to help me, aren't you?" Velouria made a strange gurgling noise, like the strangled moan of an animal choking on a bone, and a frown clouded Tygra's face. "She's doing that a lot lately."

"It's wind," Panthro said. "Give her to me." Tygra passed her over and Panthro held her aloft so that her fat little legs dangled above him. Velouria cooed and giggled, enjoying every minute of it.

"Don't drop her," said Lion-O, suddenly alarmed.

"When you've got one of these of your own, then you can tell me what to do," said Panthro. "Until then, listen to the master." He lowered her to his chest and patted her back.

Velouria abruptly burped and smiled with delight. "What did I tell you? Wind." He caught Lion-O's eye and held her out to him. "Here, you take her. It'll be good practice for you."

Lion-O winced at the implied suggestion. With the sort of care he reserved for handling raw Thundrillium, he took Velouria from him. She was heavier than he had expected and a good deal more fidgety. Pudgy arms flailed in every direction and her legs shot out with reckless abandon. For all his worry Panthro was going to drop her, he was more alarmed than ever she would fall as the squirming infant defied his every effort to secure her. Panthro indeed made it look easy. After moments of failed effort to hold her in a comfortable fashion for both of them, his nerves failed him, and he quickly handed her over to her father.

"I'm making her nervous," he said by way of explanation.

Panthro snorted. "You mean the other way round. You're frightened of her."

"I'm not," Lion-O retorted. "She's just..." He shrugged helplessly.

"A baby," Panthro finished for him. "Jaga help you when it comes to changing diapers." He reared his head back and laughed heartily, the thought of Lion-O – mighty Lord of the Thundercats – thwarted by a measure of cloth, two pins and a squirming infant completely amusing. Or so Lion-O guessed with a measure of indignity.

Lion-O was unsure what annoyed him most - Panthro's laughter or the warning look that Tygra gave him. Either way, it was time to stop it. "To get that far, you actually have to be sharing a bedroom."

Panthro sobered up. "Ah, the apology didn't work then?"

"I thought it did. She said she'd accepted it. But obviously she hasn't, so I don't know."

"You want some advice?"

"No," Lion-O said curtly. "Much good it did me last time."

Panthro grinned. "Because you didn't handle her right."

"Handle'?" said Tygra. "She's a sensible woman, Panthro, not the Thunder Tank. If she's upset, I'm sure there's a reason."

"Like?" Lion-O said irritably.

"I don't know. Have you tried asking her?"

It was the sort of thing Tygra would say. So screamingly obvious, that Lion-O had to wonder why it had not occurred to him before. He knew Felina had been sulking in her room for the best part of the day and had thought it best to leave her to stew. What was he supposed to do?

He'd already asked her once what was the matter, and he wasn't about to make a habit of it or go groveling to her. "I asked her last night. She said she was all right about things, so I assumed--"

"And that was your first mistake," said Panthro, waving a finger in his direction. "When a woman tells you she's all right, it means the opposite."

"It does? So where does that leave me?" For the life of him, Lion-O could not figure why Felina never seemed to say what she meant, but would rather leave him to sputter about blindly in the mere hope of stumbling upon the right answer.

"What you should have done is gone after her when she went back to her own room. You should have been masterful and demanded that she return."

Tygra's stifled laugh gave a good indication about what he thought of that suggestion. "Subtle as ever, Panthro," he said. "I'm not sure the sledgehammer approach works particularly well, especially with Felina. I think we all remember what happened when Lion-O put his foot down about the Book of Omens."

Lion-O would prefer that incident was kept in the past and chose to ignore the mention of it. "I tried being nice," Lion-O said. "That got me nowhere."

"In that case..." Tygra took a moment to shift Velouria's weight to his other hip before continuing. "It sounds to me like she's making you pay for whatever it was you said or did. If I were you--"

"You're not," Lion-O snapped.

"I would be very attentive and try my best to win my way back into her affections," Tygra went on, ignoring Lion-O's interruption. "Try a few compliments, things like that."

"Why? She's not interested in anything I have to say." Was Tygra actually suggesting Lion-O grovel and pander for her affections? Lion-O couldn't help but wonder why he should. It seemed to him a set up for more humiliating rejection.

Tygra sighed and exchanged an exasperated look with Panthro. "Just watch and learn," he said.

On cue, Cheetara appeared and drifted down the steps with all the haste of a summer cloud. The orange spangles on the floor-length dress she wore swayed and sparkled in the late afternoon light, like so many summer flowers touched by the breeze. When she reached him, Tygra greeted her with a smile.

"You look radiant," he said and was rewarded with a kiss on the cheek.

"You've seen this dress before," Cheetara said. "It's just an old thing."

"And it looks better every time I see it."

She drew back slightly and gave him a quizzical look. "What are you up to? I'm not staying to help if that's your plan."

Panthro smothered his laugh. "*Real* smooth," he whispered to Lion-O.

"It half worked though," Lion-O replied. "She did give him a kiss."

"What are you two muttering about?" Cheetara asked.

Caught in the act, Lion-O was lost for words, but Panthro spared his blushes and came to the rescue. "We were wondering what you've been doing for so long. You should have been here twenty minutes ago."

"Why, what happened?" Cheetara said, giving him a cheeky grin.

"All right, you know what I mean."

"I've been helping Felina get ready. You," she said, directing her gaze at Lion-O, "need to get your wife some decent clothes."

"She has clothes," Lion-O said defensively. "She wears them every day."

Cheetara was clearly not impressed. "It's not the everyday that's the problem." A sudden flutter of activity made her glance up at the main door. "Ah, here she comes."

Lion-O followed her gaze and beheld a sight that made his mouth drop open. The Thunderkittens had charged down the steps, leaving Felina standing on the top stair like a lonely statue. He remembered the red dress from their wedding, but it, like its wearer, had undergone a transformation. The sleeves were gone, revealing her bare shoulders and toned arms. Softly shining purple material was gathered around her bosom and flowed behind her like a curtain of leaves upon the breath of the wind as she gracefully descended the steps. Her hair was swept up, away from the proud arch of her neck and the perfect line of her jaw. She emitted a presence of womanly confidence as she moved, unlike when he'd seen her in the first version of the dress. He could scarce recognise her.

"Felina," he said, going over to offer his hand as she came to the last step. "You look..."

"Yes?" she said expectantly, hopefully even.

What he wanted to say was beautiful or gorgeous or wonderful, but his mouth had other ideas and refused to comply with his brain. "Nice," he heard himself say.

Felina's expression dropped. "Do I?" she said, her tone suddenly sharp and dismissive. She pulled her hand from his and headed over to Panthro. "Would you be so good as to help me into the Thunder Tank?" she said, ever so sweetly.

Panthro bowed and kissed her hand. "Gladly. You look lovely, Felina, every inch the Lady of Thundera."

"You are too kind," said Felina, eyeing Lion-O over her shoulder. "I shouldn't take all the credit though. Cheetara and Snarf did the hard work."

"Oh, they've only given Mother Nature a helping hand. Shall we?"

He offered her his arm and, with one final, triumphant glance in Lion-O's direction, she took it and walked with him over to the Tank. Lion-O watched them go, feeling more mystified than ever. He had given her a compliment and still it hadn't been enough. He turned back to Cheetara and Tygra and put the question to them.

Cheetara sighed and shook her head. "If 'nice' is the best you can do, I feel sorry for you," she said.

"But she does look nice," he protested.

"Oh, Lion-O, really! Felina's right. You are impossible."

"But what did I do?"

"You really want to know?" she said as she took his arm and started over to the Thunder Tank. He nodded. "Then let me explain..."



The shadows that normally populated the gloomy Treetop Kingdom had been firmly put to flight and Panthro was able to kill the main beam of the Thunder Tank's lights. Around them, fires blazed in braziers, positioned aloft on tall poles, and a great bonfire had been built in the centre of the clearing. Smoke and sparks rose up to the darkening sky and the air was filled with the smells of roasting meat and burning wood. Yelps and whoops accompanied the regular beat of several drums and he could just about discern several fire-lit figures leaping around the mighty blaze.

"Wow, look at that," WilyKit whispered in quiet awe.

"Looks like fun," said her brother. "What are they celebrating?"

"Willa didn't say," Lion-O replied from his seat up front with Panthro. "Something about the longest day or shortest night. Oh, and celebrating new life or something like that."

"What?" Cheetara said suspiciously. "It isn't a fertility festival, is it?"

"What's that?" WilyKat asked eagerly.

"Never you mind," said Panthro. "I doubt it, Cheetara. They would have said. Besides," he said, grinning at her over his shoulder, "you aren't a prude, are you?"

"No, but there are naive minds among us. And I don't mean Snarf."

"Or Lion-O," Felina added.

Panthro caught the remark and saw that his co-driver had as well. Lion-O was silently fuming and had been for the whole journey. As much as he hated to agree with Tygra on the subject, Panthro had to admit that the wry old tiger was right. Felina was putting her mate through the wringer and taking great delight in it too. He hoped for the both of them that she would know when to stop.

"If we don't like it, we can go home," Panthro said reasonably, deciding it was best to ignore Felina's barb. "No problem."

"Yes problem," said Cheetara. "Have you seen what they're wearing?"

The short answer to that was not much. Panthro felt his eyebrows rising to the top of his head as two women sauntered past the Thunder Tank wearing nothing but smiles. Their bodies were covered in elaborate designs, painted directly onto their naked skin with bright blue paint.

"You mean, what they're **not** wearing," WilyKat supplied breathlessly.

"Suddenly I feel very overdressed," said Felina.

"Let's go home," said Cheetara. "This is no environment for the kittens."

Her assessment was met by groans and protests from the twins.

"Don't be such a killjoy," said Panthro. "The kittens have seen nudity before. It's perfectly natural. Hell, there was a time we used to be able to walk about nude."

"That was on Thundera. That was different."

"How?" he said challengingly.

"For one thing, we've got fur covering our bodies anyway. These are human women," she pointed out.

Panthro shrugged. "They've got paint on. You'll have to do better than that."

Cheetara sighed. "It's not so much that they're nude, it's wondering **why**. If this is some kind of fertility rite..."

"Here comes Willa," said Lion-O, changing the subject. "Do we stay or go?"

"We could stay for a while just to be sociable," said Panthro. "Personally, a little nudity doesn't bother me."

"I wonder why," Cheetara remarked dryly. "If this was the Warrior Men's village, I bet you'd be singing a different tune."

"As would you," he shot back, with a sly grin that said he was only kidding. He activated the roof opening mechanism and was seconds behind Lion-O in stepping out to meet Willa. Cheetara's fears were proving to be unfounded, as the leader of the Warrior Maidens was wearing clothes, even if they were somewhat briefer than usual. Fur had been exchanged for strips of material bound tightly around her breasts and hips, while the visible areas of her body had been daubed in the same blue paint.

"We welcome you, Thundercats," she said, raising her hand in greeting.

A twinge of concern flashed through Panthro's mind as he wondered how Lion-O was going to cope with being faced with a near naked woman. He was pleasantly surprised when Lion-O showed maturity in keeping his eyes firmly fixed on Willa's face.

"We are honoured to be invited," he said. "What is it that you are celebrating?"

"The summer solstice. The sun has climbed to its zenith for another year and we give thanks for its blessings upon us and the forest."

"And the painted women?" asked Cheetara, gesturing to where they stood.

"Dancers. It is hot near the fire."

"That explains it," said Panthro, giving Cheetara a knowing look to which she scowled in return.

"Come," said Willa, indicating for them to follow her. "I want you to meet someone."

The kittens scuttled away to find mischief, leaving their elders to trail in Willa's wake. "That was a relief," said Lion-O, lowering his voice so the Warrior Maidens could not hear him. "I wondered what she was going to say. She just looks so--"

"Nice?" Felina cut in icily.

"I was going to say different."

"So, you do have another word in your vocabulary," she said, feigning surprise. "Remind me in the future to paint myself blue when I want to get a reaction out of you!"

She stalked away to catch up with Willa, leaving Lion-O smarting. "Impossible woman!" he huffed. "There's no pleasing her."

"Perhaps you aren't trying hard enough," said Cheetara.

"Perhaps she just doesn't like me. Have you considered that?"

"No," she said thoughtfully. "I wouldn't say that at all."

Willa had stopped and was waiting for them. "This night is very special for us," she said. "It is not often that we are able to welcome several honoured guests to our gathering."

"Oh, who else?" asked Felina.

Willa turned to a particularly large individual who stood by the side of small, elderly woman in the group behind her. Panthro had to look twice, not quite believing what he was seeing. The long hair was of the same style as the other maidens, but there was no mistaking the broad chest and square jaw of a fellow male.

"A man?" Felina blurted out.

"Of course," Willa said, not understanding her surprise. "May I introduce Celpa and his keeper, Rintal."

"His what?" asked Panthro.

"His keeper," said the slight woman, who now pushed her way to the front and eyed the Thundercats with disdain. "Who are these people, Willa?"

"These are the Thundercats, Rintal. They are friends."

Rintal drew her lips into a tight red line and fury creased the furrows of her brow. "This is most irregular. Outsiders are not welcome here!"

Willa stood square in front of her with her fists on her hips. "This is my kingdom, Rintal. My sisters and I are glad that you are here and you will have all the honours so due to you, but I say who is welcome here and who is not."

Aware she had been overruled, Rintal bowed in submission. "As you wish it. But if Celpa's performance is affected, it will be your fault."

"I understand and accept that responsibility," Willa said gravely, before turning back to Lion-O. "Rintal has lately been traveling amongst the southern tribes. She may have the information you seek about your missing countrymen."

Lion-O quickly explained the situation to the glowering woman and was met with a curt shake of the head. "I have encountered no such strangers," she said. "Nor would I wish to. The lot of you are enough an encounter to last a lifetime."

"What about you?" Panthro said to Celpa. "Have you seen them?"

"We do not suffer him to speak!" Rintal said sharply, slapping her charge back into place with her staff. "Willa, never have I been treated in such a manner. No wonder you have such difficulty attracting keepers. Come, Celpa, you have work to do." She turned on her heel and stormed away. The silent Celpa gave a solemn bow to Willa and the Thundercats and then followed in her wake, keeping a few respectful paces behind.

"We seem to have upset her," said Lion-O. "I'm sorry."

Willa sighed. "Everything upsets her. Earlier she was complaining about the accommodations not being up to her usual standards. It is to be expected. Keepers are always arrogant. They are in a most enviable position and often abuse it. Come, you must be in need of refreshment. The forest's bounty has been great this year."

She kept throwing in that term as though she expected them to understand what she meant. As Willa pressed wooden goblets into their hands, Panthro caught Lion-O's eye and urged him to ask. After all, now they were here and Warrior Maiden culture was being waved tantalisingly under their noses, they might as well find out more about their arboreal neighbours. Lion-O, however, firmly shook his head and Panthro knew he would have to be the one to ask. Before he could, Felina took up the challenge.

"I didn't know you had Warrior Men," she said to Willa. "That was a surprise."

Willa regarded her with puzzlement. "He is not a warrior. Males are too unpredictable and intemperate to be taught such arts."

"Yes, I've noticed," Felina said, casting a sly glance at Lion-O. "But I've never seen other men around here."

"No, they are rare, which is another reason we'd never risk them in a battle. We have not had a male child born to this tribe for over a hundred years. Perhaps this year..."

She took a sip of her drink and her gaze wandered to where the two newcomers to her tribe stood. This far intrigued, Felina was not inclined to give up now.

"So, if he's not a warrior...?"

"We use them for breeding of course," said Willa. "They are so few that the tribes must share. They travel with their keepers to the various tribes, so that those women who wish it may make use of them. Several of my sisters had requested the presence of a keeper and so Rintal's arrival is timely." Her gaze drifted back to the keeper and her charge. "Excuse me, Thundercats. I see Rintal has found something else not to her liking."

She left, leaving behind her an embarrassed silence.

"So, are we staying?" Cheetara said at last.

"It would be rude to leave now," Lion-O pointed out. "It would make it seem obvious that their culture makes us uncomfortable and I don't want to give that impression. They're our friends and have their own ways. We should respect that."

"We've already caused Willa enough problems just by being here. That was more my concern," Cheetara explained.

"If she wants us to go, she'll say," said Panthro, shrugging off his jacket. The heat of the fire could be felt even at this distance and to have moderately cool air on his bare arms was a blessed relief.

"I knew we shouldn't have come," Lion-O grumbled, his thoughts perhaps still focused in on their missing countrymen.

"Oh, I wouldn't say the evening's been a complete waste. Now we know."

"Men they use when they need and then hand them back to their keepers," Felina mused. "That's got a certain appeal."

"Then why don't you ask Willa if you can join her tribe?" Lion-O said irritably.

Felina's eyes narrowed and a storm began to brew. Cheetara dragged Lion-O away to get something to eat, leaving Panthro with a fuming Felina.

"That would suit him, wouldn't it?" she said with a certain degree of bitterness. "He'd like me out of the way. His life was just grand before I dropped in, I'm sure."

Panthro sighed. "You asked for it, Felina. You've been baiting him all evening."

"I don't know why I bothered," she muttered into her drink. "I'd get a quicker reaction if I beat him over the head with the Book of Omens."

So that was her plan. Trouble was, Lion-O was not playing along, or at least ignorant of the rules of the game. Either way, she was not going to get anywhere fast if she continued. "Why don't you just enjoy yourself tonight? There's plenty to eat and drink and it looks like there's

going to be dancing later. Have fun, Felina. Needling Lion-O – give that a rest for both of your sake."

She considered for a moment and gave a lacklustre nod. "My heart's not really in it though. Would you like something to eat? It looks like the roast is ready."

He thanked her and she left, promising to return as quickly as she could, although judging from the expectant queue that was forming, Panthro knew she would be gone some time. Still, there was no rush. Surrounded by so many pretty girls, it was hard to be miserable this evening, especially as one in particular was making her way determinedly towards him. A shy smile greeted him, and a familiar voice bade him welcome. He had to look twice to make sure he had the right person.

"Nayda?" he said. "Is that you?"

She was dressed the same as her fellow Warrior Maidens, except her long hair was swept back from her face and caked in what looked like whitish clay. But there was no mistaking her bright eyes.

"You didn't recognise me, did you?" she grinned, flashing white teeth between blue lips.

"No, I didn't. It's a different look for you. What's with the hair?"

"I've been wrestling in the clay pits," she said. "It's traditional."

Panthro had to quickly banish the image that came to mind and moved onto safer ground. "Good party," he said, gesturing to the crowd. "Looks like everyone's enjoying themselves."

"Yes, we have double cause to celebrate this year," she said, collecting herself a drink. "Have you met Rintal?"

"Yes. She didn't seem very pleased to meet us though."

Nayda nodded, as though this came as no surprise to her. "Rintal has a low opinion of outsiders. She keeps Celpa too isolated, if you ask me."

This was not a line of conversation he had intended to start, but since they were on the subject, a question that had been nagging him for a while finally found the strength to make it into words. "This Celpa," he said. "Are you hoping...?"

Nayda stared up at him and it seemed to take her an agonizingly long time before she understood his meaning. "Oh, no, not I. Only warriors who have claimed a hundred kills are allowed to bear children. I have a long way to go yet," she added a touch regretfully. "I try to attend as many hunts as I can, but there are so many of us, that the opportunity does not often arise. Even so, I feel I am letting Willa down."

"Oh, why?"

"An heir would strengthen our line."

The look on her face suggested that she considered that to be an adequate answer. For Panthro, however, it left more questions. "Why can't she have her own baby?"

Nayda cast a wary glance about her. The majority of her sisters were clustered around the roast and this distance seemed to satisfy her. "Because it has been prophesized that her first born will be a male child," she said, lowering her voice so that he could barely hear her. "A warrior, a great warrior, will always give birth to a daughter first, as Cheetara did. A male child would be a great blessing on our tribe, but it will cast doubts upon Willa's ability to lead. She cannot take that risk, especially not now, even though there's enormous pressure for her to produce an heir. If I had enough kills, I could take that pressure off of her by bearing the heir myself. Our line would at least still have their status guaranteed into the next generation."

Panthro almost questioned the strangeness of their beliefs, but then stopped when he considered his own cultural norms on mating and lineage, such as they put Lion-O and Felina through for the sake of tradition and continuity, and thought better of it. To each their own.

"There's trouble?"

Nayda nodded. "A while ago, before you arrived on Third Earth, some of my sisters sought to overthrow her. They contested her claim because our mother was from a different tribe, although she had earned her place and right to rule by claiming a thousand kills. Because of this, Willa had much support and the conspirators were defeated and exiled. However, things have not been easy. The Mutants have been pressing hard and I hear doubts being raised again." She looked down at her feet and tried to avoid his gaze. "Your presence here this evening was greatly resented."

"By Willa's opponents?"

"Yes. They say she will anger the gods by allowing you to attend this sacred gathering."

He gently lifted her chin and gazed into her eyes. "And what do you say, Nayda?"

"I say you are our friends. You have helped us and, on many occasions, saved the lives of these mighty trees that give us shelter. The gods open their arms to all who have respect for their creations. They say you are welcome." A smile crept across her lips. "And I am glad that you are here."

On an impulse, his hand wandered and rested lightly her shoulder. It felt comfortable there, as though it had found its natural home. Only when he became aware that Felina had returned and was watching him with interest did he suddenly realise how his gesture might be misconstrued.

"Nayda and I were just talking," he said, putting some distance between them.

Felina looked from one blushing face to another. "Yes, I noticed," she said, handing him a plate of roast meat. "I got you this. You said you wanted it."

"Yes, thanks."

"I'll leave you to your food," said Nayda. "See you later."

She hurried away to join her sisters, leaving Panthro staring after her and missing her presence already. It was ridiculous, he told himself. He was a Thundercat and she was a Warrior Maiden. If Willa had problems now, he could imagine how much worse for her it could get if he acted on the feelings he had for her sister. Feelings he hadn't felt for a woman since, hell, back on Thundera. And that was even if she would or could reciprocate. Still, she had not been offended by his touch nor had she attempted to move away from it. There was something there, he was sure, and with that thought allowed himself a moment to revel in it before reminding himself again of the absurdity of the scenario. Besides, he was a married man, in his heart at least if no longer in fact. A large part of him wondered if he could love like that again, and risk losing it all. It was a void and a sorrow he never wanted to feel again. Whoever coined the phrase 'it's better to have loved and lost than to never have loved at all' was full of shit, he decided.

"I'm going to find those Thunderkittens and make sure they're behaving," he said suddenly, passing his untouched plate to Felina.

"Aren't you hungry?" she asked.

"You have it," he said gruffly. "I've just lost my appetite."



Felina's appetite was also non-existent, and she set out searching for Lion-O. Cheetara had earlier imparted the advice that she should talk with Lion-O but all she managed to do was give him a hard time. Panthro, she begrudgingly admitted, was right. She hadn't been at all pleasant to her mate, and even though he wasn't responding the way she hoped, he was trying in his own awkward little way. She had no right to keep pushing his buttons so mercilessly. Whatever the Warrior Maidens were serving as refreshments was also likely responsible for her softening mood as much as her own conscience. Regardless, she worked her way through the exuberant crowd of naked and nearly naked women, looking for Lion-O.

She finally found him at the other end of the clearing, off away from the fire and the crowds, looking up at the twinkling stars alone. Cheetara apparently, left him to his own devices,

for she was nowhere in sight. He kept his attention to the heavens as she approached, and she struggled in her mind with what she wanted to say to him.

Felina reached out and brushed his sleeve lightly with her outstretched hand.

“Hey,” she said, looking to him with a bit of an uncertain smile. “Listen, we should talk.”

He looked at her finally, his face at first giving away nothing of his emotions. “Got some cutting remarks you left out back there?”

She hung her head a bit and shook it slowly. “I-I’m really sorry about that. I don’t know what gets into me.”

Felina brought her eyes up to meet his gaze. When he had no response, she took a deep breath and forged ahead.

“I didn’t accept your apology last night with the best of grace. I definitely haven’t treated you well at all today, either. And I want to tell you why and what I’m feeling. Not to make excuses,” she quickly amended.

She felt encouraged when his expression switched from hurt and hardened to that of concerned interest. “Go on,” he urged her cautiously, as if waiting for her to spring some sort of humiliating trap.

Felina stepped closer to him and gathered his hands into hers. “In the Sword Chamber, what snapped me back in a foul mood was seeing Tygra and Cheetara...supporting each other, openly showing their love and expressing it. I want that for us. Don’t you?”

He frowned a little, looking at her with a bit of befuddlement. “Don’t we have the beginnings of that? They’ve been together for years, Felina. And they’re older, more experienced than we are. You don’t expect us to be that comfortable with each other overnight do you?”

She steeled herself to keep her resolve. She came to him to be honest, so she was going to lay it all out on the line. “Honestly, I don’t think the way we’re going we’ll get even close to that – even before that horrible argument the other day. I just don’t feel it from you. You may like me, but I don’t think you’re in love with me.”

He gave her hands a squeeze before releasing them and turning away from her. “Yes, we’re definitely not going to get there playing all these games, Felina. I don’t know why you couldn’t just tell me all this before. Maybe that fight would have never happened if we talked more in the first place.”

The fact that he never confirmed or denied any sort of love for her stung her to the core. She was practically feeding him the lines and they were going right over his head. Or were they? The nagging part of her conscience reminded her that perhaps being a man of honor as he was,

he would not express what he did not feel in the first place, and that she was just beating her head against the figurative wall trying to weasel it out of him by dropping hints.

“Games?” she echoed. “Is that why you think I’m over here talking to you?” Suddenly aware that her voice was rising, and a few eyes glanced their way, she walked around til she was in front of him and dropped her voice to more of a seething whisper. “This is getting out of control and we have to get serious if we want the marriage to work. I don’t want to end up in a loveless marriage of convenience like...like my mother.”

He looked into her eyes intensely for a long moment. “There’s just so much going on, and we have to deal with this, too. Everything happened too fast, didn’t it?”

She looked away and sighed. Thundera dying, their mad escape, and the unnatural aging they both experienced, those things alone were bad enough. But they both lost their childhood – and courting years – and had to take up adult mantels neither was quite ready for – with an arranged marriage heaped on top of it. All of it indeed happened at a speed that would make even Cheetara envious. Perhaps she was expecting too much and pushing too hard. Backing off would do them a world of good, she considered.

“Maybe. But isn’t that what you want for us? What they have? Real love and a family?” she pressed. She still wanted to know if it was something he ever wanted to happen. Just a hint of a possibility would do for now.

“I guess so,” he struggled, appearing as though he hadn’t thought much about it before. “Eventually. There’s just so much more we have to worry about and do.”

“There’s always going to be a lot going on around us.” She shook her head in frustration. “Is it ever going to be the right time?” she asked him bluntly. “Are you simply making excuses? Otherwise, give me the courtesy of some honesty here. If you don’t think we have a chance to have something like they have, then just say so.”

Lion-O scowled, and Felina again questioned whether she was pushing too hard. But she couldn’t help herself. She had kept her fears and worries about their future together too long – not to mention harbored an increasingly hopeless fantasy that they could share what their elders had together, never for one moment stopping to consider that perhaps she idealized those elders a bit too much – and she needed definitive answers.

“We’re not them, Felina,” he said sternly, referring to Tygra and Cheetara. “Our circumstances are entirely different. Furthermore, I’m not a fortuneteller. I don’t know when I’m going to be ready, feel differently, or anything else. I’m doing the best I can to meet everyone’s expectations of me. Pressuring me isn’t going to help – I get enough of that from everyone else.”

You mean, you’re not Tygra, she thought bitterly. Besides, she knew, Cheetara and Tygra faced many of the same dangers and challenges and still managed to find time for tenderness, so Lion-O’s explanations were becoming all the more transparent in Felina’s mind. He just wasn’t falling for her and he probably never would. Not that she’d been exactly charming lately, but

there had still been plenty of times in the past for him to act toward her better than some kind of hormonal teenager when the mood struck him.

“We just have to try to get along and make the best of the situation.”

Felina grimaced and tried to reign in her frustration. “Oh, I hate when you talk like that.”

“Like what?” he demanded, and the fact that he never seemed to realize he had foot-in-mouth disease irritated her all the more.

“Like our union is some sort of bothersome duty that one must stoically endure. Thanks for nothing.”

He sighed heavily and a long silence lapsed between them while Felina looked forlornly back toward the fire, its image blurred by the tears forming in her eyes. She finally looked back at him to see him studying the ground.

“Perhaps we should take a break from each other. Spend some time apart,” she proposed shakily. It seemed they couldn’t spend five minutes with each other without bickering and one thing everyone was right about was that the situation as it stood would surely not work. In fact, their every stormy encounter only served to drive a wedge deeper between them.

Resigned, he simply nodded slowly without looking up at her. Accepting that as his answer, she strode off back into the crowd willing herself to have a good time despite Lion-O, unaware of the silhouette of a certain stocky maiden in the shadows.



Arilla distanced herself from the crowd and dug a communicator out of a hollowed knot in a nearby tree. Monkian had given it to her to keep in contact with him, and she had too much on her mind to have it wait until morning.

She incessantly hammered on the call button until a very groggy and irritated voice came back at her through the device. “Arilla,” he grouched, knowing without asking who so disturbed him. “It’s the middle of the night. By the Pits, I thought I told you we were done, woman!”

Arilla snorted derisively. “Shut up, fur face, and listen.”

A disgruntled grunt from the other end of the communicator told her he was still on the line.

“The Thundercats are here at our festival. It doesn’t bode well for Willa’s standing with some of the Maidens, inviting outsiders to such a private event.” Heavy breathing on the receiver was his only acknowledgement, so she went on. “And the Thundercat leader and his wife seem to be on the outs.”

Monkian gave a gruff snort. “You woke me up for a soap opera report on the Thundercats? More than ever, you’re wasting my time! Useless gossip,” he muttered.

“Wait!” she urged, sensing he was about to end the communication prematurely. “There’s more. Nayda, Willa’s sister, and the bald Thundercat seem to have something going on. Perhaps that bit of ‘gossip’ is useful to you?”

Stone silence greeted the announcement at first, and she wondered if he had left.

“Perhaps,” he admitted grudgingly. “Though I expect that is more of an interesting development to you than to me.”

“Don’t be a simpleton,” she chided. “Yes, okay, the fact that Willa’s sister may be taking up with an outsider male will have a woeful impact on her reign. If you think their crashing our party went over badly, just wait ‘til word gets out that someone from the ruling house is with an outsider – an alien cat creature at that!” Arilla was simply happy Nayda could not make use of Celpa, as her interest in Panthro was far more desirable from where she stood. She completely ignored the fact that on more than one occasion she found the simian Mutant strangely attractive. What woman of her stock wouldn’t admire a male of his build who could also swing the treetops with enviable skill? Her agenda to see Willa ousted overrode any hormonal surges a general lack of men in their tribe inspired, however. “But, you could use this information, I’m sure. Capturing a Warrior Maiden – especially if I draw her out to be isolated for you to snatch – should be easier than catching a Thundercat. Then you can use her to bend the strong one to your every whim.”

After another silence, Monkian sighed. “We’ve tried the hostage ploy before, but...we can talk about it tomorrow. Meet me in the usual spot *on time*,” he added.

A satisfied smile spread across her face. Done with her? Hardly. He needed her.

“Good. And then I can spell out for you the significance of the trouble between the little newlyweds.”

“I’m going to crush that blasted communicator,” he muttered, apparently under the impression he’d ended the call.

“I heard that, fool,” she responded with a roll of her eyes. She ended the conversation with a decisive click of the off switch and stuffed the item back in the hollow of the tree. Better, if it was discovered, that it was not associated with her and this was why she didn’t keep it among her effects. Here, she could blame it on Mutant henchmen using it to spy on their movements, being on the perimeter of their grounds. It was good to keep things plausible and most of all, untraceable to herself.

Arilla stepped out of the shadows and noted that Lion-O was no longer sulking apart from the group on his own, but back among the revelers trying to put on a happy face. Moreover, her eyes sought out his mate, the one called Felina. She seemed decidedly more immature and prone to snap judgments, Arilla decided after witnessing her exchange with Lion-O, and those qualities were just what Arilla needed to have a little fun.

From the tenure the girl had spent among the maidens, Arilla knew she was a restless, unhappy soul. And Arilla planned to use that against her, perhaps to befriend the girl – seem the kindred spirit to gain her confidence. Then she'd have someone on the inside of the Thundercat circle in which to act the unwitting foil to any future plots she may hatch involving their manipulation. Furthermore, she'd heard the story of how the girl was unnaturally aged, much like her husband, and that certainly worked in her favor. It should be easy enough to pull the wool over a virtual child's eyes, even if she did seem at least quite book smart for her age. Some things, like what double-crossing monsters people could be, were not learnt through books but Arilla was sure she could teach Felina this hard lesson. What were 'friends' for? Yes, she liked this idea and was sure if all went well tonight, that Monkian, too, would have to admit to her sheer genius in the matter.

Arilla looked down and made sure what scant garments she wore were in place before almost skipping back out into the thick of the party, her eyes still scanning for the unwilling Lady of Thundera. At last she spied the girl sipping from yet another glass of wine and looking most unhappy.

Excellent, Arilla thought with measured glee. Drink up, sweetheart. Further cloud what little judgment and sense you've got.

Anyone who would push her petty concerns onto a fellow as strapping as Lion-O, rather than enjoy his company, was a fool in her mind. Maybe if Felina had to wait in line, literally, for a mate *after* working her tail off hunting to feed her clan, she'd have more of an appreciation for carnal rewards. From her understanding of their union, Felina hadn't even had to win him over – he was simply *given* to her. The girl seriously needed to get her head out of the clouds and back to reality. As much as Arilla disliked the Thundercats, she couldn't deny the male folk among them were built and would make fine male concubines if her culture would allow their inclusion for their mating rituals.

She ditched the smug look as she sidled up to Felina, replacing it with the best expression of dire concern she could muster. "I'm sorry if I'm out of place," she began, flashing a tentative smile at Felina. "But I couldn't help but notice you don't seem to be having a very good time. Is there anything I can do?"

Felina looked into Arilla's dark eyes, and the maiden could see a spark of recognition in her. "I'm sorry, you do look so familiar but I'm afraid I can't remember your name," the Thundercat replied apologetically.

"Arilla," she supplied sweetly.

“Ah, yes, Arilla. Thank you, but I’m afraid it’s not your fault. The party is lovely, rest assured. I’m just having some,” Felina paused, once again looking rather embarrassed, “personal problems.”

Arilla looked the picture of concern. “Would you like to talk about it?”

Felina shook her head. “I won’t bore you with it but thank you. I’m pathetic,” she admitted with a nervous laugh.

Yes, you are, Arilla agreed in thought while keeping her external façade up.

“Men?” She said aloud, the word dripping with sympathy.

Felina nodded, sipping from her drink. “One in particular,” she pouted, her eyes finding Lion-O standing on the other side of the bon fire, laughing at something Panthro had just said to him.

Arilla followed her gaze and noted he’d taken his jacket off, and the white undershirt he sported showed off his chiseled body fetchingly. If it were her that claimed him, Arilla certainly wouldn’t be pouting at a party. She’d be off somewhere private enjoying what men and women were created to do. However, it did amuse her to see Felina’s reaction to him. Seeing him so jovial after their argument darkened Felina’s mood considerably, or so Arilla noticed.

“Well, given our culture I can’t say I relate entirely,” Arilla began. *We tend not to take the company of men for granted*, she thought, before continuing aloud. “But I do know what it’s like to feel unappreciated and used.”

That part was entirely true, though Arilla tried to keep the bitterness out of her tone as much as possible. No need to make the girl suspect something deeper was afoot. Not that she figured Felina would take a break from being self-involved long enough to care about someone else’s problems, and she was right.

Felina stared at Arilla wide-eyed.

“Oh, honey it’s so obvious that he doesn’t treat you as he should. *Everyone* can see that. How else are you to feel?” Arilla expounded gently.

Noticing her glass was nearly empty, Arilla graciously offered to refill it. The Thundercat did not object and actually seemed eager to spill her guts to another woman who held none of her own cultural biases. Perfect.

Bonded in sisterhood, how quaint, Arilla thought with amusement.

Arilla listened with rapt attention, but only because she took in everything Felina confessed and turned it over in her mind, figuring the best way to use it for her own means. The

woman's actual plight, though it was mostly melodrama and imagined slights from what Arilla could tell, she couldn't care less about.

Arilla proceeded to fill Felina's head with notions such as how men outside the maiden culture were only after one thing, and at least in her tribe, the females recognized their true power. This was, of course, that they were in control of when and how, and that men would actually respond better and more desirably if only Felina would assert her dominance in the matter. To Arilla's delight, Felina seemed to take her advice to heart, which would all but guarantee marital bliss to remain nothing more than a dream for the troubled couple.



With the fire burnt low and the first streaks of daylight painting the sky, it was time to leave. Two sleepy Thunderkittens were gently placed on the seats in the Thunder Tank's rear compartment to sleep away the journey home, while their elders made their goodbyes to Willa. Somewhat to Lion-O's surprise, Cheetara had taken his usual seat in the front cabin, relegating him to the rear.

It was not entirely the unpleasant change he expected, for he found himself squashed up beside Felina. Despite their recent troubles, he did find her attractive and since the sleepiness and perhaps the wine had brought on a more amiable mood in his wife, the ride might not be so unpleasant after all.

The soft velvet and silky smoothness of her dress brushed his leg in a most alluring manner. She was tired and her head nodded, until she finally gave up the unequal battle and rested against the nearest support, which happened to be his shoulder. He did not protest and left her to her rest, even chancing to put an arm around her and hold her to him. She snuggled up closer and a hand wandered over to his. Her fingers loosely intertwined with his and stayed there as the journey progressed, leaving him to ponder what he had done right this time that he had failed to do before. She'd revealed more in their talk earlier that evening than ever before, but he still felt she was holding back something. For now, at least, she was letting her guard down and he was quite reminded of a trek they'd made in search of a Key and the night they spent huddled by the fireside.

Only when the Thunder Tank hit a bump in the road did Felina stir and twist her head to gaze with sleepy eyes up at him.

"Hi," she said. "Sorry, did I go to sleep?"

"Yes."

She pulled away and then yawned and stretched. "It was a wonderful party overall," she said with a sigh. "If a little strange."

"Well, we wanted to get to know our neighbours better. I guess now we have."

Felina smirked. "And we got to see a *lot* more of them."

"I didn't notice," said Lion-O. "I only had eyes for you this evening."

Whether it was the wine or tiredness, he had spoken without really giving thought to what he was saying. The words had come to him instinctively, like breathing, and it had felt like the most natural thing in the world. Strangely, he felt no embarrassment or awkwardness and yet knew he should apologise. Felina wanted distance and he was crowding her. He supposed he was guilty of pushing her in his own way.

But then he saw the look on her face.

She was smiling with such radiance that the glow banished any trace of tiredness. She leant towards him and her hands traced a path up his chest until they came lightly to rest against his cheeks. He made no move but let her come closer in her own time. Her lips brushed his and despite his yearning he forced himself to wait. His patience was rewarded when she kissed him, hesitantly at first, then stronger and deeper until he could contain his feelings no longer. His arms snaked around her back and he pulled her to him until she was practically sitting on his lap. He found himself wanting more as he felt her body respond to his touches. Then, all too quickly, it was over with her pulling away from his embrace.

"Steady," she said, tapping him on the nose and settling back into her own seat. "We aren't alone."

He suspected it was something else, but as an excuse it was good enough. She rested her head lightly on his shoulder. Now seemed like a good time to clear the air, although he had to admit to a certain degree of nervousness in broaching the subject. It was worse than facing Mumm-ra. It took several false starts during which her interest was fully piqued before he was able to put his thoughts into words.

"Felina, about the other night. I know I apologised and you explained why you were still upset back there, but I still have to say something about that..." She said nothing and instead watched his reaction with interest. "What I said about your mother, that was unforgivable. I don't know why I said it."

"Yes, you do."

She seemed to be able to read him as easily as one of her books. And she was right. He did know why. He'd said it to hurt her, to win points in a stupid argument. "Yes, and that was unforgivable, too. I've behaved badly, not at all like a Lord of the Thundercats should. What can I do to put it right?"

He felt her eyes burning into the side of his face and found that she was studying him intently. "Do you really want to?"

"You know I do," he said, reaching for her hands.

"Why?"

"Because..." He hesitated, not knowing what to say. "Because, that's why."

Felina rolled her eyes and sighed. "Not good enough."

"Then what do you want me to say? That I like having you around? All right, I admit, I'll never be able to share your love of studying - it's just not in me, Felina. But I did try for a long time, I swear, and not entirely with the ulterior motives you suspect. I'm not very good at that sort of intensive learning. It's a failing I admit." He paused for breath and plucked up the courage to face her. "As for us, I had no agenda other than that I wanted us to be together."

She held his gaze until he thought he saw the beginnings of tears in her eyes. At that point, she looked away and suddenly found her nails very interesting. "You *like* having me around?" she said in a small voice. "You've never told me that before."

"I thought you knew." It seemed obvious to him that much of what he did for and around her screamed of his affection for her - perhaps not as much as he'd thought. But what more did she want? For some reason, she insisted on doubting his every gesture and it was becoming maddeningly frustrating. Couldn't she see he was doing the best he could?

Felina shook her head. "It's good to hear you say it."

"Then perhaps I should say it more often." Spoken reassurance. Could it really be that simple?

She glanced up at him. "Yes, you should."

That sounded promising, he decided. "So, will you be moving back into our room?"

"When I'm ready."

"Any time soon? It was lonely in bed last night." He mentally chastised himself for pushing the issue, especially in light of their earlier confrontation, but he had to admit he'd grown used to having her beside him with or without intimacy being involved, and he sensed she felt the same way. Though, yes, the intimacy was always a nice bonus.

"And cold so I hear," she said, giving him a mischievous grin. She swiveled slightly so that she was facing him and let her lips linger an inch from his. "Just how sorry are you, Lion-O?"

"Very much."

"How much is that?" she purred.

"When we get home, I'll show you."

He thought it was rather a good reply. Felina, however, seemed to take it badly. With a snort of ill-temper she retreated to the opposite seat, where she shut her eyes, crossed her legs and pointedly ignored him. Finding he could do no more than copy her excellent example, he allowed his sleepy eyes to close and spent the rest of the journey reflecting that he would never understand women as long as he lived.

*So what ya gonna do about me?
I been hangin' 'round a while
Trading books and knowing glances
I thought I'd stick around
But this really ain't my style*

*So this ain't heaven on earth
Looks like we'll have to wait
But we are standing at the gate*

*I took a look inside your attic
And secret shelves and hidden rooms
It didn't scare me when I saw it
Your hidden attic is no temple of doom*

*So what ya gonna do about me?
Put me on a secret shelf?
I wanna change myself around
You know I'd do it
If I thought that it would help*

*So this ain't heaven on earth
Looks like we'll have to wait
But we are standing at the gate*

--*Standing at the Gate, E*