

Chapter 27 of *Signal in the Sky*

Only

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If something was too good to be true, then usually it was.

On the main viewscreen of the *Vertis* high above the hazy miasma from Firerock Mountain, Captain Shiner stroked his chin and watched a promising situation rapidly turning sour. For all of Mumm-ra's promises and assurances, it seemed the old fool had underestimated the strength and cunning of his enemy once again. Not that the Thundercats were any problem; their ship was down and as far as he could see, they were trapped, unable or unwilling to leave their relative safe haven to risk exposing themselves to the noxious fumes of the molten rock that was poison to their species.

No, Mumm-ra's mistake had clearly been more fundamental. He had underestimated Grune.

From what little he knew of the fellow, he was a Thunderian gone bad. If the old adage was true, then the enemy of Mumm-ra's enemy should have been his friend. Looking at him now, however, it didn't take a genius to see that there was going to be trouble. Grune's upturned face was twisted into a grimace of rage as he tracked Mumm-ra's progress across the sky and the way he wildly swung his club at the reddened clouds was tantamount to a challenge in anyone's book. Clearly, he had to be the reason for the presence of Thunderians in this accursed place of moving mists and bubbling lava flows. If Mumm-ra expected him to blithely hand them over, then he was going to be sorely mistaken.

For a moment, Shiner was torn between trying to contact Mumm-ra to let him know of this development and letting the drama play out. Either way, he could see a slim chance of getting the riches promised to him when he had undertaken this mission. It was only by chance that he had again been passing close to Third Earth and accepted at all. Several hours ago, it seemed simple enough. Use some device called a Thunderscope that Mumm-ra had pilfered from the Thundercats to locate other Thunderian survivors somewhere on the planet. For this, Mumm-ra had made bold promises about covering him in gold. The old mummy had deftly deflected any hints as to why, with this great power of Ancient Spirits backing him and a pool of magical scrying liquids, he could not locate these survivors himself. As a mercenary, Shiner wasn't one to question a paying customer's motives and hadn't pried much beyond a casual remark.

It had sounded too good to be true, however. Now Shiner was left reminding himself that he should have learnt his lesson by now.

Any action he was about to make became redundant when he saw Mumm-ra swooping down to the stricken Thundercat ship. Obviously, he had seen Grune. All that could be done now was to watch and wait for the whole depressing episode to unfold. There was a certain inevitability about it that didn't need Shiner's lofty viewpoint to know what was going to happen. Mumm-ra

would demand the Thundercats and the Thunderians. Grune, the intractable fellow that he was, would no doubt refuse. They would fight. Time would be wasted. The Thundercats would get their ship moving again and somehow they would win, as they always did. Even though his dealings with the species had been limited, Shiner knew enough to be sure that the gods smiled kindly on these felines and that luck ran on their side. If only Mumm-ra and his so-called allies could see that too, they wouldn't waste so much time fighting each other and concentrate instead on their true enemy, the Thundercats.

Still, what point was there in telling them? He was a mercenary, out for hire, paid to fight other people's battles, not get drawn into the morality of them. Mumm-ra and his cronies could go to hell as far as he cared. They could fight this battle until the end of eternity, and he would support whichever side could afford his services. Someone had to make money out of the conflict, and he could think of no better person to do so than himself. That is, if he got paid at all.

If Mumm-ra came out of this empty-handed, then Shiner could see himself being out of pocket, too. That was unacceptable. This wasn't some charitable organisation he was running, nor any favour he felt inclined to make for that surly collection of dry bones. This escapade had already cost him in fuel and a valuable contract with a diamond cartel on the fringes of the Nebulean cluster. When it came to money, Mumm-ra had a lax attitude to his and other people's fortunes. If he thought that his crusty spells and shadowy spirits made the world go round, then Shiner had news for him. Wealth was the only reality and the only way to get it was to take it from someone else, either by stealth or by force.

And since force was inappropriate here, then by stealth it would have to be.

"Is the teleport functioning?" he barked out to one of the junior flight officers.

The man's grey chins wobbled as he gave an answer in the affirmative.

"Excellent."

Shiner smiled to himself. It might be worth risking Mumm-ra's displeasure just to see the look on his face when he realised his precious Thundercats had been snatched from under his nose. And then, of course, would come the negotiations. Yes, he was sure Mumm-ra would pay dearly to have them back. Just being covered in gold might not be enough.

"Lock onto the Thundercats trapped in that downed ship and have them teleported aboard," he ordered.

"A rescue, sir?"

"No, a kidnapping," Shiner corrected him. "Have a guard ready to meet them and make sure the cells are prepared." Again, he smiled. The irony of the situation was almost too delicious. "I have a feeling our guests might not be too pleased to see us."



The light flickered and winked into darkness. Its passing was marked by silence for words alone could not convey the enormity of what that single light had meant. With it had died any hope Lion-O had harboured of escape from Firerock Mountain. Now just getting out of there alive seemed almost impossible too.

"What now?" he found himself asking.

For a long time, Panthro stared at the stilled light. When, finally, he mustered enough energy to reply, it was only to shake his head and confirm what everyone in the Feliner already knew.

"That was the last of the power. The energy drain of the shield on the reserve cells stripped them faster than I had anticipated."

That hadn't really answered Lion-O's question, so he asked again. "What now?"

Panthro glanced over at him. "Honestly? You can't work that out for yourself?"

"Yes, but I was hoping we had other options."

"You mean rather than wait to see which gets us first, the Thundrainium, Grune or Mumm-ra?" asked Felina.

He caught the rising pitch of concern in her voice and wished he had something to say other than to agree with those bleak choices. If ever a bad situation had got worse, then this had to be right up there with the major disasters in Thunderian history. Not only were they stuck in a Thundrainium field, the fumes of which were separated from them now only by a thick outer coating of metal, but outside were not one, but two of their avowed enemies. Grune was bad news on his own, but since Mumm-ra had appeared their chances of making it through to the end of the day alive had just dropped considerably. The shadowy inhabitants of the Astral Plain were probably preparing a welcome for them right now. Lion-O had to wonder if one resident in particular was looking down on him now with disapproval. It was his job to lead, and Lion-O had to admit he wasn't doing such a hot job of that at the moment.

With that unpleasant thought in mind, he could feel his sense of helplessness turning to despair. He was Lord of the Thundercats, bearer of the Sword of Omens. With all this power at hand, he had to be able to do something to drag their hides out of this dismal situation. Sitting in the Feliner waiting for something to happen was an anathema to his soul. He'd thought of calling the others by sending the signal up, but what good would it do? They had no transport to get them there in time and even when Tygra and the others showed up, they would face the same grim odds. No, the four of them had to pull themselves out of this somehow.

"I'm going outside," he said decisively.

"No," said Panthro. "You do that and you'll be as weak as a kitten before your feet hit the floor."

"Not necessarily. If I can use the Sword to blast a way through the rocks--"

"What about the effect of the magnetic field out there on the Sword's powers?"

That hadn't occurred to him. Now he realised the futility of what he was saying, frustration translated itself into anger. He struck the control board with his full might, leaving a spidery crack where his fist had impacted on the metal.

"Then what **are** we going to do?" he demanded of no one in particular.

He glanced up, expecting to see Grune's mocking face sneering down at him, but instead found that the former Thundercat's attention was now focused elsewhere. He watched as the sole of Grune's foot lifted and came smashing down again, making the ship rock. There was only thing he knew of that could make Grune that angry and craning his head round to see the cause showed him that his guess had been correct. There was Mumm-ra in his towering, energised form, hands on hips and teeth bared in part grimace, part smile.

"Looks like there's gonna be a fight," said Panthro, following Lion-O's gaze. "That might work in our favour."

A loud yawn sounded from the rear seats and Lion-O looked over his shoulder to see that Felina was just removing her hand from her mouth.

"Sorry," she said, "I'm just feeling so tired."

"That'll be the effect of the Thundrainium," said Panthro, trying unsuccessfully to stifle a yawn of his own. "I thought we'd have a bit longer than this before it started getting to us."

"Have you shut the vents?" suggested Cheetara.

He gave her a lop-sided grin. "That was the first thing I did. See?" He half turned and tapped a grilled panel. A little of his good-humour faded when his finger traced the fine crack that had not been there a few minutes ago. "What the--" he began. Licking his fingertip, he placed it over the crack and his brow furrowed with concern. "There's air coming in here. We've got a leak."

It didn't take too much imagination to work out who was responsible for that. Lion-O inwardly cursed his inability to control his anger. One silly outburst and show of rage was rushing them all closer to a Thundrainium-induced coma. That was unless he could think of a way out of it.

With anger getting him nowhere, he took a deep breath and tried to think what Jaga would have done had he been here. Jaga had given some brief advice only several minutes before, when he'd appeared to warn of the trap Grune had laid. In retrospect, Lion-O had to wonder why Jaga hadn't spoken up before they'd found themselves in this mess. Being wise after the event was hardly to be commended; in having such knowledge, surely timing was everything? But then,

Lion-O reminded himself, if Jaga constantly held his hand from the astral realm, then Lion-O would never learn from experience how to lead.

Furthermore, the fact remained that he, Lion-O, had to bear a large portion of the blame for this situation. He had pushed this mission until he had become sick of talking about it. He had experienced the highs of anticipation and the lows of disappointment. For someone always used to getting what he wanted, the frustration was soul destroying, almost as much as the cat-and-mouse relationship game he played with Felina. Because he wanted it, because he wouldn't give up or take a minute to think about what he was doing, that was why they were here, in a dead ship, with an all-powerful weapon that was useless beyond their limited confines, waiting for death to pluck them at its leisure. So much good had it done for him to bring the Sword this time, for his fear of having it fall into enemy hands or be destroyed during the trip that ended at Hook Mountain, was fast coming true on this outing. Lion-O could appreciate irony, but not when it was happening to him, he realized. Trying to tell himself that his friends had wholeheartedly supported him in this venture hardly mitigated his guilt. *'It's not my fault everyone's dead'* was not an epitaph he had wanted to see on his gravestone.

He was rudely shaken from his indulgent thoughts as the Feliner shook under the impact of what felt like an energy blast. With the shield gone, the starboard wing sheared off and the body of the ship was thrust back towards the edge of their precarious landing place. The shock had hurled Lion-O from his seat and when his wits had returned to normal, he found he had ended up on his back, looking up into Panthro's equally dazed face. Sitting up, a quick look out of the cabin window revealed that Mumm-ra and Grune were now engaged in a fight. Energy blasts spun wildly from a massive double-bladed sword that Mumm-ra twirled, easily fending off the frenzied rage of Grune's attack. As if Mumm-Ra was not menacing enough in his everliving form, it was disheartening to see he'd gained some kind of impressive weapon besides.

Of more immediate concern was their own situation, for now the Feliner's rear port side hung out over the mass of liquid Thundranium and the ship was rocking as it tried to decide whether to stay on land or risk plunging into the flow below.

"No one move," Lion-O ordered. "Just stay perfectly still." The ship finally made up its mind and decided to stay put. "Cheetara, see if you can move over to where Felina is. It's better if there's no weight over that side."

"Despite the implication that I'm heavy," she said, giving him a smile, "I can see the logic in what you're saying." Gingerly, she got to her feet. The Feliner swayed a little and Lion-O held his breath. Only when it had stopped moving did Cheetara take a step closer to Felina. The slightest shift of her weight and the ship thudded solidly onto firm ground. Another step and they were out of immediate danger. Lion-O felt able to breathe again.

"Thank Jaga," he said. "Everyone all right? Felina?"

"Yes, I'm fine, Lion-O," she said, unable to contain her vexation at his attempts to show concern even under these trying conditions. He had to remind himself of Tygra's advice about not smothering her and resolved to do better in future. That was, if they had a future. Being between

a rock and hard place was hardly the time or the place to start analysing the failure of their relationship, however.

"What now?"

The question he had asked earlier came back to haunt him, except this time it was Felina doing the asking. And still he had no answer.

"We wait," said Panthro, much to Lion-O's surprise. "Whoever wins won't just leave us here." He shrugged, trying to think of anything good that could possibly come out of that situation. "I suppose they'll take us somewhere and then we'll have to think about escaping. How does that sound?"

"Grim," said Cheetara. "What makes you think they won't just tip us into the Thundrainium?"

"Because they would have done it by now." Panthro yawned heartily and rubbed his eyes. "By Jaga, I feel weary. I'll be glad to get out of this place."

Lion-O snorted. "You make that sound like a positive step in the right direction."

"Well, we can't do much here, let's be honest."

"Except wait."

"Right."

"And if it doesn't play out like you've said?"

Panthro opened his mouth to answer. In the aftermath, that was the one thing that Lion-O remembered clearly. He saw Panthro's lips begin to form a word a split second before the world turned red. A crimson wash coloured the cabin windows and the very air around them. With it came a roar like the battle cry of an enraged beast. The sound slammed into him and made everything shimmer before his eyes. The thin sliver of land that had been beneath the Feliner was suddenly above them and the ship was airborne again. Her engines were dead and yet she flew, not with the elegance of powered flight, but on an inevitable horizontal course that gradually decayed into a graceless plummet, leaving her inhabitants' stomachs somewhere far behind.

Upside down, the Feliner splashed into the lava flow and began to sink into its depths. Like slime, the outside world oozed through the cracks in the ship's broken shell and penetrated the stifling interior. With it came such fatigue that the shimmering blue light that shone for a few seconds in the dimmed cabin was barely seen through half-closed eyelids, which finally succumbed to weariness and closed as the glow faded away.



All interest in the fight was forgotten as Grune watched the stray bolt of energy fly from Mumm-ra's weapon straight towards the stricken Feliner. Already clinging to its thin hold on solid ground by a thread, it would have taken the tiniest jolt to send it tumbling into the depths of Thundrainium hell. The energy bolt had power enough to thrust the ship far out over the bubbling sea of molten rock, throwing it into the air like child's toy, before leaving it to fall back to earth. The Thundrainium received this offering with greedy thanks, quickly consuming it and dragging it down from sight.

The Thundercats were gone. No magic in the world could pull them alive from that fiery embrace. His one chance for revenge had been cruelly snatched away. Someone would have to pay.

"You rancorous fool!" Grune roared, turning his rage on Mumm-ra. He charged at him, club already swinging in a deadly arc towards the sorcerer's head. Momentum carried him on, even when Mumm-ra had stepped deftly out of harm's way. A swipe with the flat of the blade of the weapon Mumm-ra carried sent him flying, and Grune the Mighty ended up sprawled on the floor, his club reeling from his hand like a drunken snarf. Groggily, he made it up to his hands and knees and glared daggers at Mumm-ra.

"I will tear your withered heart from your body for this!" he growled, raising a clenched fist for effect. "Believe me, I will!"

Mumm-ra seemed unimpressed. In fact, he laughed. "You can try, as many have. But do not blame me for your own failure, Grune."

"This is your fault! I had the Thundercats in my grasp--"

"And now they are dead." Mumm-ra smirked. "We both have what we want. Does the method matter?"

Grune snarled and struck the pebble-strewn ground with his fist. "To me it does. I wanted to see Lion-O beaten by my hand, to have him know the sense of failure and the bitter taste of defeat that has dogged my days since Jaga ruined my life."

Mumm-ra made a sound halfway between a snort and a laugh. "Such you could have had if you handed the Thundercats over to me as I asked."

"You would have shared your victory with me? I doubt that."

"You can still have your revenge. Give me the Thunderians and you may have the honour of dealing with the remaining Thundercats. Cat's Lair could be yours, if you have the guts to take it."

Grune eyed Mumm-Ra with suspicion, for he did not trust wizards with their sneaky ways, even if he did have that magic to thank for being back among the living. "What about the Sword of Omens? Now it's lost, too."

Mumm-Ra shrugged. "I am content that it's melted down into a pool of molten liquid with its contemptuous bearer. Either outcome pleases me, really. Besides, I never could figure out how to get it to cooperate with my dark powers. It's just as well. So, what do you say, Grune? Do we have a deal?"

Under different circumstances, Mumm-ra's offer might have merited serious consideration. After all, what were three scrawny Thunderians compared with the greater prize of the Thundercats' fortress? The temptation to agree lasted less than a heartbeat before he was reminded that Mumm-ra's meddling had snatched away from him the intense pleasure of dispatching Jaga's protégé to join him in the Astral Plain. He'd invested far too much energy into that twisted dream to meet with such a disappointing outcome.

"Never!" he roared, jumping to his feet and grabbing his club, ready for battle. There was still satisfaction to be gained from this shambles, even if he had to be content with wiping that grin from Mumm-ra's face.

Mumm-ra in his turn took up his weapon and the twin blades extended from the handles. This sword had a certain look about it that struck a chord in Grune's memory, but for the moment he could not place where he had seen it before. Certainly not here on Third Earth but in another lifetime, perhaps, on the home from where Jaga had driven him. Shaking his head to drive the feeling of familiarity away, he resolved to give the matter greater thought when he took it from Mumm-ra's severed hand.

Before the battle could begin, however, a light from above made a blue circle on the rutted ground. Down into it descended a slim man, dressed in a grey uniform, with a monocle in one eye and a smirk on his face.

"Captain Shiner, what are you doing here?" Mumm-ra said, rounding on the newcomer.

"How soon you forget that if not for my locating the Thunderians, you yourself would not be here fighting over them." The smirk on the man's face broadened into a knowing grin. "Relax, Mumm-ra, I bring good news. I thought you might be interested in this."

The hand he brought from behind his back held a short sword, which had a large jewel embedded in its hilt that was reminiscent of the slit pupil of a cat's eye.

"The Sword of Omens?" Grune said. "How did you get that?"

"I took it from the Lord of the Thundercats after I had my crew teleport them from the wreck of their ship," Shiner said. "He and several of his friends are now my 'guests' aboard the *Vertis*."

Mumm-ra broke into a hearty laugh. "Then we have not been robbed of our revenge, Grune. Captain Shiner, you will teleport the Thundercats down here to us immediately."

"That will be a pleasure, after we discuss the small matter of payment."

"Payment?" Mumm-ra's eyes narrowed. "I have promised you riches. That should be payment enough."

"Ah, yes, that was to cover our original agreement for a search and locate mission. That did not include use of the teleport." He pulled a face, feigning an apologetic manner. "The price of fuel these days is such that I am forced to renegotiate, Mumm-ra."

"What is this?" Grune demanded. He had an itch to cave the side of this haughty stranger's head in with his club. "Hand over those Thundercats or you'll not live to regret it."

Shiner's manner abruptly changed. "It would be unwise to threaten me. For a start, I doubt you could react before I am teleported back to my ship. And if you were to carry out an attack on my person, my crew is ordered to destroy those areas of Third Earth most necessary to your continued existence. Your dwellings, for example."

"You wouldn't dare," Mumm-ra growled. "You sniveling wretch!"

"All I ask is fair payment," Shiner said, as though it was the most reasonable request in the world, "and then the Thundercats are yours to deal with as you see fit."

Mumm-ra seemed to hesitate.

"Give the man what he wants," said Grune, deciding it was better to appease this unknown man and get on with what he came there to do. Material things meant nothing to Grune. Not like getting revenge on Jaga did. "Any price is worth the pleasure of having the Thundercats in our hands."

"And if I refuse to pay, what then?"

The question took Shiner aback, as though he had never given that possibility much thought. "Then I must sell them to the highest bidder. But I had imagined that you--"

Mumm-ra waved him into silence. "Yes, of course I will pay a hundred times over my original offer. You will have your reward, Captain Shiner. Despite your insolence, you have done well."

He gave a slight bow at the unexpected praise. "I aim to please."

"And so, you do. Hand them over."

"I was thinking that maybe an advance on your promise might be in order first."

A slow smile crept across Mumm-ra's lips. "Did you? You are not a man to take things on trust?" He gave a small laugh. "Neither am I, Captain Shiner. Just as you do not trust me, I also have my doubts. But we have made a deal. You will have your money once I have a show of good faith from you."

"Oh?"

"That sword for example."

Shiner eyed him with the wary stare of someone who knew his advantage was rapidly slipping away. "Very well, Mumm-ra. I suppose I must trust you."

He held out the Sword of Omens and Mumm-ra took it from him. Turning it over in his hand to inspect the weapon, he studied it with as much reverence as if it had been a sacred relic. The twinkle in the mummy's dead red eyes showed Grune that his earlier nonchalance regarding the sword belied his real feelings. Even if Mumm-Ra couldn't use the sword's power, having won it was the culmination of a dream come true. Having it in hand was a tangible status symbol for him to lord over all who might question his might and was much better than the 'fish story' of telling how he'd disposed of it in a bubbling pool of lava. In a way, Grune mused they had much in common.

Seeing his rapture, Shiner delicately cleared his throat.

"Uh, Mumm-ra, we had a deal?"

His words went unheard as Mumm-ra gave voice to his own thoughts. "Long have I dreamt of having the Sword in my power. Now it is mine. Mine!"

The last word came out as a shout that reverberated the length of the canyon. What little colour there was drained from Shiner's face as he watched Mumm-ra lift into the air with the Sword of Omens held in triumph over his head.

"Keep Lion-O and his accursed friends, Shiner," he called down. "I have what I want!"

With his tattered cloak spread behind him like the ragged wings of a great bird, Mumm-ra flew up into a bank of mottled clouds and vanished from sight. Cursing his name long after he knew the sorcerer could no longer hear him, Grune hurled insults at the empty sky before turning his attention on Shiner. The mercenary had been so caught up in watching Mumm-Ra's escape, it was easy for Grune to close in on him.

The absurd monocle popped from his eye socket when the raised club came to rest inches from his nose.

"I want them, Shiner," Grune growled. "I want them here in two seconds or you'll be dead in one. Do you understand me?"

"Quite clearly. And my fee?"

Grune smiled. The man had nerve, more than he would have expected from a hired hand. "How about I give you your life? That sound fair to you?"

Shiner gulped. "Very. I'll have them sent down immediately."



The return of consciousness hurt.

Not because of the weariness that tugged at his body and made every movement an effort, but because of the pain that would radiate out from an epicentre somewhere in his lower back every now and then. It was always preceded by a voice, telling him to wake up in the coarsest of tones, then a pause before the thud and more pain.

He supposed he should investigate the cause, but he hurt too much to care. Perhaps if he lay here long enough, both would go away.

They did not.

"I said, **wake up**, Lion-O!"

First the voice, then the pause and he caught himself waiting for the blow. It hit him roughly in the area of his kidneys and he could not prevent the low groan that escaped his lips and betrayed his wakefulness.

"Ah, so you are alive," came the voice. "I was wondering."

"Were you?" Lion-O said, surprising himself at the weakness in his own tones, barely audible above a distant roar like the ebb and flow of an ocean. Forcing his muscles to work brought them under his control enough to enable him to sit up and face his tormentor. He was not disappointed in his guess about who that might be. "I thought you **wanted** us dead, Grune."

From his position on the floor, Grune seemed even taller than usual. He was not so distant, however, that Lion-O could fail to see the grin on his face, lop-sided behind his single remaining fang.

"So, I do, Lord of the Thundercats, but by my hand, not that of a kindly fate."

From high above, a hand descended towards him. Lion-O tried to dodge it, but weakness betrayed him and made his movements slow and clumsy. Grune grabbed him by the mane and

hurled him through the air. Lion-O thought he might have flown forever but for the unyielding wall that smashed into his shoulders and contemptuously sent him sliding down its uneven surface.

By the time his head had stopped spinning, he was aware enough to know that his surroundings had definitely changed for the better. The last he remembered was being in the Feliner, watching the molten Thundrainium block out the light as it closed in on them and the burning pain of lava splashing on his skin where it seeped into the ship. Glancing down at his arm, he saw the raw flesh where it had touched him and knew that that part of his memory had been real. After that, it was a blank.

Somehow, he had ended up in a cavern whose walls were the colour of dried blood, lit by flaming torches held in sconces. He still felt weak, but not to the same degree as when he had been in close proximity to the Thundrainium. The lethargy dogging his every movement told him it was somewhere in the vicinity, enough to slow him down, but not much more than that. It helped to know his limitations, including a noted lack of the Sword of Omens, especially now that Grune was striding purposefully over to him, a look of absolute hatred on his face.

His club came up and smashed into the wall inches from where Lion-O had been sitting. Had Lion-O not slithered to one side, he shuddered to think of the damage that club would have done to his body.

Grune snarled with annoyance at missing his target and came after him again, club swinging recklessly. Driven by rage, his aim was wild, and Lion-O was able to dodge out of his way until he came up against another solid wall and found he had nowhere left to go.

Seeing his predicament, Grune relaxed enough to laugh. "Look at you, Lion-O, crawling on the floor like a newborn kitten. And you call yourself the Lord of the Thundercats? A pitiful lord at that. What would Jaga think of you now?"

His efforts had robbed him of breath and through gasps he tried to get out an answer. "I know what he thinks of you, Grune. You're a traitor to Thundera and Thundercats and everything for which the Code of Thundera stands."

The laughter stopped. "A **traitor**, am I?" Grune mused on this accusation for a minute, his expression growing serious. "Perhaps that is an easy label to give to anyone who dares question the authority of the Code and those who claim to uphold it."

"Or perhaps it's the truth. I know why Jaga exiled you from Thundera."

The mere mention of his name made Grune seethe. "**He** was the traitor. He betrayed **me**!" Inner flame blazed in his eyes. "I trusted him, and he slithered into my bed when my back was turned. He stole my love! He stole my life! Ask your friend, Panthro. He was there when I got railroaded by so-called Code honouring ThunderCats." The club came up and Lion-O instinctively raised an arm to protect himself. When nothing happened, he looked up to see that an uneasy calm had come over Grune. He was breathing hard and a new expression had settled over his face. Not one

of anger and fury, but one laced with cruelty. "He took everything from me," he murmured. "Now I will destroy everything he loved."

He grabbed Lion-O by the mane and hauled him from the chamber into a room with a rough-hewn door that scraped the skin from Lion-O's leg. No sooner had he been dumped on the floor than Grune retreated to slam the door shut, locking them both in the room. Lion-O forced himself to sit up and found to his horror that they were not alone. In the centre of the room, their hands manacled above their heads were Panthro, Cheetara and Felina. All three were awake and very aware of what was happening. He tried to struggle towards them, only for a swipe from Grune's club to send him reeling across the room. A river of blood spurted from the wound down his face and into his eyes, leaving him blind, but not deaf to what Grune was saying.

"Look at him, your **precious** leader. Why do you follow this whelp, this runt, this pathetic excuse for a Thunderian?"

"He is Lord of the Thundercats," came Panthro's even voice. By the time Lion-O had cleared his vision, he saw that his expression was as deceptively calm as his voice. "He's our leader. He's proved himself time and time again."

"Lord of the Thundercats," Grune sneered, circling behind his captives. "A title that inspires such devotion for so little worth." He bent down so that his lips were close to Felina's ear. "Tell me, little one, is **he** worth it?"

Her lips were slightly parted, and she was breathing fast. She was trying to be brave, but her fear was palpable. Grune knew it and his assault was merciless.

"Oh, I know all about you, Felina. How you came to Third Earth. How you've ended up in a marriage you didn't want to this wretch!" His vehemence was manifested as so much saliva that landed on her cheek and dribbled down her face. "He ruined your life, didn't he? Well, answer me!"

Felina shook her head and tried to squirm away from his closeness, but he was persistent in his haranguing.

"Leave her alone," said Panthro. "If you've got issues with Jaga, take it up with him."

"Would that I could," Grune retorted, "but that base coward fled the justice of this world and hid from me when I was among the spirits besides. Your boy here had to call him out in order for me to fight him and even then, he couldn't win on his own accord."

Grune's attention returned to Felina. "How true the saying about the sins of the father." He ran the back of his finger down her cheek, all the while keeping his gaze on Lion-O, making sure he knew this show was for his benefit. "You should have been so much more," he said in Felina's ear, almost tenderly. "You should have been my child. If you had been, just imagine - you wouldn't have been forced to marry boy wonder, free to live your life and read your little books

in peace. You could have married someone of **your** choosing, felt real love. Instead, you are Jaga's spawn and you have been and will continue to pay the price for his crimes."

When Felina said nothing, Lion-O hung his head somewhat and wondered if Grune hadn't actually hit on her true feelings. However, nobody's feelings were going to matter in a moment, and Lion-O had to think fast.

Grune got to his feet and wandered back over to Lion-O. "And what of you, cub? What have you to say in your defence? Are you a 'good' leader?" He chuckled. "I suppose not, or you would not be cowering at my feet now."

Using the wall as a support, Lion-O clambered up to his feet to meet Grune face to face. "You talk too much, Grune," he said, trying not to sound too out of breath from the sheer effort of the manoeuvre.

"And your silence does your credit?"

"At least I know the right words to use at the right time!"

To Grune's surprise, Lion-O brought his hand up and shoved him in the chest. Grune went over backwards, giving Lion-O enough space to raise his arm and call for the Sword of Omens. He felt the surge of strength that heralded its coming, felt the sense of elation at so easily tricking Grune, felt ready to do battle with this vile traitor. And yet nothing happened. One long second slipped into another and another, and from his position on the floor, Grune started to laugh.

"Nice try, cub. If you're looking for your sword, Mumm-ra took it with him back to his Pyramid."

Barely had Lion-O time to take in this information than Grune had leapt to his feet, directing a vicious blow at his stomach. The impact knocked the air from his lungs and Lion-O found himself doubled up on the floor, gasping for breath, muscles revolting at the damage done to them by Grune's calculated punch. He'd banked on the Sword being in the vicinity, assuming Grune had disarmed him, and that it would be able to react to his call within the caves. Lion-O had been gravely mistaken on all counts.

"Call yourself a leader?" came Grune's sneering voice. "You're nothing without the Sword of Omens. At least Jaga was a worthy adversary, but you, cub, you're little better than those whining Thunderkittens."

A kick to Lion-O's already sore stomach drove his point home emphatically.

"Third Earth will be well rid of you and your wretched followers," Grune went on. "Or would it? I wonder."

There was something about his change of tone that made the hairs rise on the back of Lion-O's neck. Despite his pain, he gingerly straightened out his aching stomach and tried to catch a

glimpse of Grune's face. His eyes were narrowed as if he was giving something serious consideration. The fact that his gaze was directed towards Felina only added to the growing sense of trepidation that was fast taking hold of Lion-O's soul.

"Your fight is with me, Grune," he said, struggling to rise again.

"So it is, although naturally I hate all Thundercats. They stupidly follow a code that means nothing – they're all hypocrites. You," Grune said, stabbing his club in Lion-O's direction, "will not live to see another day, but is that enough? No, I don't think it is." A sick smile curled the corners of his mouth. "I have a deal for you, Lion-O. Let's see how good a leader you really are."

"I'll make no terms with you, Grune."

"Hear what I have to say first before you say something you may regret. I'll let two of your friends live on the condition that you name the one who is to join you on the Astral Plain."

Lion-O felt all moisture leave his mouth. What Grune was proposing was monstrous. How could he possibly make a decision like that and condemn one of his friends to certain death?

"No," he said hoarsely, "I won't do it."

"Won't?" Grune laughed. "Or can't? Come now, Lion-O, every leader faces tough decisions in his career. This is yours. You have the chance to save two of your friends. Choose!"

"Never!"

Grune brought his club to the side of Felina's neck, causing her to flinch and whimper. "Choose," he said in a low voice that only added to its hidden threat, "or all will suffer, and I will make you watch them die."

It was an impossible thing to do. In a matter of hours, a simple rescue mission had seen them lurch from one disaster to another. And now there was this to deal with. It was no exaggeration to say that for the first time in his life, he felt utterly lost. True, there had been many times when their situation had seemed worse than hopeless, but it had never been like this. He had no Sword of Omens, no way out, no hope of a last-minute reprieve. This was happening, here and now, unfolding before his eyes like one of the horror stories Snarf had tried to stop him reading in his younger days. That his folly had made his own life forfeit, he could accept, but not that of one of his friends. And if he had not the courage to make a choice, even that decision would be snatched away from him.

As he looked from one face to another, he couldn't believe what he was actually contemplating. Logic pointed him towards one obvious candidate, and he could tell from the look of resignation in Panthro's eyes that he had reached the same conclusion. Cheetara had Tygra and a young daughter to go home to, and Felina carried Lion-O's own unborn offspring. They were also younger than Panthro, and sexist as it may seem, women. Assigning one of them to such a fate

went against every protective instinct in Lion-O, and likely within Panthro as well. Despite the hardened resolve in Cheetara's expression, he couldn't help but feel as he did.

Lion-O even thought he caught an almost imperceptible nod of Panthro's head, urging him to make the right choice. Logical perhaps, but not inevitable, not while he had the intelligence and cunning to stop Grune before he could carry out his threat.

"Well?" Grune prompted. "I'm waiting, Lion-O, and my patience is wearing thin."

Lion-O's brain went into overdrive. There had to be another way. And like the sun emerging from behind a cloud, the light of realisation came to him. He had to turn the tables on Grune and get the advantage in this battle of wits. It was so obvious he wondered why he hadn't thought of it before.

"Then **you** choose, Grune," he said boldly, "only make sure it's the right choice. Mumm-ra will be very disappointed if you get it wrong."

"What?" Grune's brow furrowed. "What did you say, cub?"

"I never had you down as Mumm-ra's lackey, but times change."

It was an insult too far and it had the desired effect. With a terrifying howl, Grune charged from behind the other Thundercats and hurled himself at Lion-O. The spike of the club came flying down towards his head, but Lion-O had anticipated it and arrested its downward arc inches from his head. Grune roared in outrage and applied all his weight to the club. For a few brief seconds, Lion-O was sure he could hold his own, but then came a feeling of such weakness that sweat broke from his forehead as he called upon all his strength to keep Grune at arm's length. Slowly, the spike lowered towards him, until he was brought down to his knees and the glimmering tip was only a fraction away from his left eye. Just when he thought it would pierce him, Grune relaxed his grip, only to take a firmer hold and snatch the head of the club from Lion-O's weary hands. Grune's revenge came as a blow to the side of his head that left him seeing stars. He was only dimly aware of being dragged over to the wall and his hands being hoisted above his head to be fastened into manacles.

"Nice try," said Grune, panting from the exertion. "But you'd obviously forgotten that my club is forged from raw Thundrainium. Trying to take it from me was foolishness indeed. And stupidity in a leader can be very costly, as your friends are about to find out."

The thin, wavering voice that issued from his lips was one that Lion-O did not recognise. It was the voice of failure, of acknowledged defeat, a vain plea not to do this. It sickened him to hear it, even worse to know that he had failed miserably. His friends would die because of his failure to do what was demanded of a leader, to be the one to make unpleasant choices. The thought of living with that on his conscience was only slightly lessened by the knowledge that Grune would not long permit him to outlive the others. Worse was the pain of the protective urge that burnt as brightly now as it had ever done for Felina and their unborn child. He could do nothing for her now and sought her understanding. She would not meet his eyes, but kept her gaze firmly fixed

on the floor. It could mean only one thing, that if she did not hate him before then surely she must now.

"Grune, no!" he called weakly. "Do what you like with me, but let my friends go!"

Grune ignored him and took up position opposite his three captives. "Who is to be?" he said, tapping his bloodied club in one of his hands. "Brave, bold Panthro? My lady Felina?" His gaze wandered to the person in the centre of the group and a smile came to his lips. "No, I think you, Cheetara, would be a much better candidate. What do you say to that?"

Cheetara sighed with the sort of wearisome vexation usually reserved for a double shift of guard duty. "Why does that come as no surprise?"

"To one blessed with a sixth sense, I suppose it should not. Any last words?"

She considered for a moment. "Yes. Get on with it."

Grune seemed mildly taken aback at her flippancy. "What? No protestations of your eternal devotion to the Code of Thundera? No begging to be spared for the sake of your lover and child? No condemnation of your leader?"

Cheetara fixed him with an unwavering stare. "This isn't Lion-O's fault. You engineered this situation, Grune, and what's more, you made sure he was weak and disarmed. Fair as always, I see. And then you gave him an impossible choice, which I have no doubt you had no intention of honouring. You were always going to kill us because you hate us all."

He grunted in acknowledgement of her assumption. "Perhaps I have underestimated you, fast one. You have uncommon intelligence."

She shrugged. "Know your enemy."

"That is true enough. It is a shame that your leader has condemned you to share in his fate."

"I'm sure I'll get over it."

Grune hesitated, thrown by this strange attitude. Lion-O too found himself questioning Cheetara's sanity. What was she thinking, urging Grune on like that? Only when she glanced over at him and he saw her wink did he realise that she knew exactly what she was doing. He stopped tugging at his chains and watched in fascinated horror as Grune raised his club high above his head. It came hurtling down, too fast for him to arrest its flight as Cheetara, her hands suddenly free, sped away from him in the blink of an eye, as only she could do. The club hit solid rock and the shock wave made his teeth rattle. With its spike buried in the ground, Grune's attention was fixed on pulling his weapon free as Panthro leapt to his feet and slammed his doubled fist down on the back of his neck. Grune collapsed senseless to the ground and failed to move even after Panthro jabbed him in the ribs with his toe.

"About time he shut up," Panthro remarked. "Nice move, by the way."

Cheetara smiled broadly. "He did say that he'd underestimated me."

"In more ways than one."

"You're... free," Lion-O said breathlessly. "But how?"

She held up a thin sliver of metal about an inch long. "A handy splinter I got from the Feliner's cabin. It hurt like anything to pull it out, but it came in useful."

"You picked the lock?"

She nodded. "When Grune went to get you. It only took a few seconds."

True to her word, Panthro and Felina were free equally quickly and then she came over to Lion-O to work her magic on his chains.

"Thanks," he said when he was free. "You still took a risk though. What if he hadn't come after you first?"

"As I said, know your enemy. Grune would have done well to remember that."

"Lucky for us he didn't," said Panthro, massaging his wrists. "Shall we get out of here before sleeping beauty wakes up?"

"We still have to find our countrymen," Felina reminded him.

"And then find a way to escape from Firerock Mountain before the Thundrainium gets us."

"Is that where we are?" Lion-O said, looking around at the featureless walls. "I know I felt weak when Grune's club was near me, but I don't feel it now."

"Then we're probably in the caves under the mountain," said Panthro. "Just like Tygra said, the rocks are shielding us from the effects of the Thundrainium."

"Then there's a good chance our missing countrymen are here as well. Let's spread out and see if we can find them."

Panthro and Cheetara went on their way, leaving Lion-O to usher Felina from the chamber and lock the door on the unconscious Grune. She had already started to wander away when Lion-O called her back.

"Felina, what happened back there, are you all right?"

Her face was smeared with dirt and clean lines cut in the grime told him of her tears. It had been an ordeal for all of them, but especially he guessed for Felina, given what he knew of her family's connections with Grune.

She nodded without any enthusiasm. "Yes, Lion-O, I'm fine. And you?"

She lifted her eyes and her gaze drifted past his to settle on the drying blood that had matted his mane and caked itself to his forehead and cheek. She reached for the wound and he caught her hand and held onto it.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I know what I should have said... but I couldn't."

A faint smile lifted some of the strain from her features. "Shush. I understand."

"I don't. Felina, can you forgive me for placing you and our baby in such danger?"

Despite her assurances, he felt that her smile was just a little too forced to be true. It was easy to say she had forgiven him, but he wondered what lay behind her mask. If their relationship had been strained before, now things between them would be even more awkward. Suddenly he knew what it was to be the one in the wrong. Not so long ago, Felina had been seeking forgiveness from him and he cringed to think now how he had behaved. If she felt then half as bad as he did now, he could only imagine what he had put her through for a simple slip of the tongue that paled into comparison beside what he had done.

Any further embarrassment was spared by a call from Panthro down one of the corridors to Lion-O's left. With Felina at his side, he dutifully set off in its direction, his progress slightly impeded by the stiffness of his movements courtesy of the beating he'd taken. Soon enough he found Panthro standing beside a hefty wooden door. As Lion-O approached, a jerk of the panther's thumb at the room gave him a good idea as to the reason for the summons.

"They're in here," explained Panthro. "I don't suppose Grune had any keys on him?"

"I forgot to check," replied Lion-O. "Is it a problem?"

Panthro grinned and threw his weight against the door. "Is it hell," he said, kicking the broken timbers away with his foot.

Lion-O looked in to find a gloomy chamber. In the middle of the room were three individuals, from their markings unmistakably Thunderian. A part of him wanted to let out a sigh of relief. At last, their missing countrymen had been found. But now their problems really started, Lion-O thought. Free they might be, but not from Firerock Mountain.

When the door had smashed, the younger two of the unhappy trio had got to their feet to meet whatever was coming their way. Now they stood, hands tied behind their backs, looking warily in his direction as if expecting trouble. One, a male with the markings of a member of the white tiger clan, looked somewhat younger in years than his companion, a puma female, who although

petite in frame, had the advantage of height. Bound as they were, both had taken up fighting stances and looked ready to give any intruders a run for their money. Deciding it was best to identify himself before any misunderstandings occurred, Lion-O cleared his throat and stepped into the light.

"Don't be afraid," he said in a clear, authoritative voice. "I am Lion-O, Lord of the Thundercats."

The pair exchanged glances. "He looks genuine enough," said the female.

"It could be a trap," said the tiger.

"No, I **really** am Lord Lion-O." He advanced a step into the chamber, his hands held up to show that he bore no weapon against them. "We've come to rescue you."

Neither seemed particularly impressed by this statement. "Lord Lion-O was but a child when Thundera exploded," said the tiger with evident hostility. "You are far from that, whoever you are."

"There was an accident," Lion-O explained. "I aged in suspension. Please, you must believe me."

"I do."

It was the other individual who spoke. An elder male of the lynx clan, he had remained seated on the floor unlike the others. He sat with his eyes closed and his head slightly inclined in Lion-O's direction.

"You do?"

"I recognise your father's voice in yours," he said. "Greetings to you, Lord Lion-O. We thank you for our rescue. Forgive my young friends their suspicion. Our time here has been long and marked with much deception."

"I can understand that. You don't have to explain."

No sooner had the words left his lips than both the tiger and the puma dropped to their knees in reverence before him. "Forgive our error, my lord," said the tiger. "We did not know."

"There's no need for that," said Lion-O, feeling awkward. He gestured to Panthro to help him free them of their bonds. After another thank you and several references to his title, he was starting to feel less deserving of such respect. "And please, it's just Lion-O. We don't stand on formality around here."

"Yes, my lord, I mean, Lion-O," said the female, smiling as she corrected her mistake. "My name is Pumyra and this is Bengali." The tiger, now with a name to fit his face, nodded. "And our knowledgeable friend here is Lynx-O," she said, helping Panthro get him to his feet.

"Yes, I know," said Lion-O.

"You do? How?" said Bengali.

Felina had been standing in the shadows outside the room and he beckoned to her. She entered and stood almost shyly at his side. "I think you know my wife," Lion-O said.

"No, I don't think so," said Bengali, frowning at Felina. "I'm sure I'd have remembered, although you do seem familiar somehow. What is your name?"

"Felina," she said, blushing.

His mouth dropped open. "Little Felina? But you're... you're...all grown up and you were..." He measured a distance some feet from the floor, a foot or so shorter than her present height. "What happened?"

"After the crash, I woke up to find that I was no longer a child." She glanced up at Lion-O. "Another accident, I guess."

"I understand I have you to thank for saving Felina's life on Thundera," said Lion-O, offering his hand to the tiger.

"Anyone would have done the same. And now you're married?" At Felina's nod, he whistled. "We have been away a long time."

"About that," Felina said, while wringing her hands. "I'm sorry it's taken us so long to find you. It's my fault. I thought that I was the only survivor."

"That's all right. We came to a similar conclusion. We didn't think you'd made it through the crash, much less ever hoped the nobles were here, too!"

"What about Jagget and Ocelia?" asked Lynx-O. Felina answered with an almost inaudible and regretful no, which Lynx-O was able to hear with ease. "I had feared as much," he said sadly. "We owe Jagget our lives. His bravery saved us all."

"It is a sacrifice we shall not forget," said Pumyra. "If not for those two, none of us would have made it off Thundera."

"Indeed, but conversation must wait. I sense our new friends are eager to leave this place, as are we."

"You guess correctly," said Panthro. "Although how, I don't know. What happened to your eyes?" he added as an obvious afterthought.

"An accident," said Lynx-O in an offhand manner as though to talk about it was to him an irrelevance. "What I have lost, however, is more than compensated for in the enhancement of my

other senses. However, your agitation, my friend, would be evident even to one without my advantages."

Panthro grunted in amusement at the remark. "Yes, well, we have a slight transport problem in getting you and ourselves out of here."

"Like?" asked Bengali.

"We don't have any."

"That is a grave problem indeed," said Lynx-O. "I wish we could be of some help."

"You might yet," said Lion-O. "What were your occupations on Thundera?"

"Blacksmith," said Bengali.

"I was training as a healer," said Pumyra, almost apologetically. "Sorry, that's not much use in this situation, is it?" Her gaze drifted to the dried blood on Lion-O's head. "Although that wound needs attention."

"Later," said Lion-O, forestalling any further questions about how he acquired it. A retelling of his encounter with Grune would only compound an already awkward situation. They were already in enough of a mess without their new friends losing any further confidence in him. "I was hoping that one of you might be able to shed some light on how Grune got you here. Did he use a ship?"

Bengali shrugged. "I guess. There were a bunch of pirates at the beginning -- berks, I think they called themselves."

"Berserkers," Pumyra corrected him.

"Yes, right. After that, they kept us blindfolded. Sorry I can't be more help than that."

Lion-O sighed and nodded. It was more than he had expected from civilians even if it told him nothing more than he had already been able to work out for himself. If Grune had used a ship, either he had hired it from a mercenary, who would be long gone, or it was his own and not likely to be anywhere close at hand where his captives might be able to get to it. The prospect of spending any more time here than was necessary was not a pleasant one, but for the time being he could see no other option than to wait for their back-up plan to come into operation.

"Never mind," he said, forcing himself to smile reassuringly. "When our friends realise we're missing, they'll come to get us. We'll just have to wait until they get here."

"How long?" asked Bengali.

"Soon." That was the best Lion-O was willing to offer, though he now wished he'd sent up the signal when he had the chance. It would take them long enough to get there in the ThunderTank, assuming they even had an accurate last heading on the Feliner before it went down. Now they had to wait for rest of the Thundercats to realize they were having problems on top of everything else. However, pinning down an unrealistic time slot would only leave him looking foolish when Tygra failed to materialise. He was sure he would, but when?

"Well, then," said Panthro, rubbing his hands together, "looks like we're in for a wait. Is there anything to eat around here?"

"I can't recommend the cuisine," said Pumyra. "The food Grune provided could kill you from boredom."

"We'll have to make do with that. Let's see what we can find."

With that, he headed out of the room in search of provisions. Lion-O was sure he would find something. Panthro had a good nose where food was concerned and had an unerring knack of stumbling across the most unexpected of morsels. It was a safe bet that it wouldn't be long before he returned with food for all of them.

Lion-O followed him half-heartedly down the corridor and only realised he was being shadowed when Bengali's voice sounded behind him.

"What about him?" he said, looking through the bars of the cell where Grune still lay sprawled unconscious on the floor.

"We'll leave him there," said Lion-O. "It's no more than he deserves."

"Is it?" the tiger grunted. "He said he was using us as a trap for someone. I guess we know who that was now." Blue eyes met his and Lion-O felt as though his measure was being taken. "He said he was going to kill you, did you know that?"

"He did mention something about that."

"You came to blows?"

The penetrating stare had wandered to his head wound and Lion-O felt his hand go to his still-sore brow. "Yes." More than that, he did not feel inclined to offer, especially not to someone who was a stranger to their ways and their personal history. "Were you mistreated?"

"We were fed and watered. That was the limit of his interest in us." There was bitterness to the remark that did not escape Lion-O, although, like him, he was unwilling to say more. "Why don't you kill him?"

The question came almost as a surprise. "Why would you say that?"

Bengali looked back to the figure in the cell. "My father always said to do unto others as you would have done to yourself, only make sure you do it first. Grune wants you dead. You let him live, he'll keep coming after you."

Lion-O nodded. He sensed the desire for revenge in the young tiger's words. It was a reflection of the same anger he felt, and it burnt just as brightly. He had to admit to being tempted. It would mean an end to the grief Grune brought and the anguish he had seen visited on Felina when he had openly taunted her. He would be justified in carrying out the sentence, but for the same reason, he knew he could not. To do so would bring him down to Grune's level and break faith with everything he held dear.

"I cannot do it," he said firmly. "I am a Thundercat. My oath and the Code of Thundera demands I uphold justice. If he'd died while in direct conflict, so be it. But to go in there and take the life of one lying there helpless..." Lion-O let the implication hang in the air a moment before going on. "Besides, I know my enemy. If I remove him, another will take his place. While Grune is after me, I know what to expect. Furthermore, I **will** not," he added, "because I would enjoy it."

He fell silent, leaving Bengali to take in the full implications of this remark. The tiger, however, looked as unconvinced as ever by this argument. "Whatever you say. You are Lord of the Thundercats, after all."

Before Lion-O could reply to that, Cheetara had appeared at his side, slightly out of breath and with an anxious look on her face. She acknowledged Bengali with a nod before blurting out her news.

"We've got trouble. That Mutant vessel you said was heading this way is here. Armed guards are heading in this direction as we speak."

He felt his soul sink to his boots. This run of bad luck had to end soon. Then the thought came to him that perhaps it had.

"Get the others," he ordered. "Armed or not, we're taking that ship and getting out of here."

"Or die trying?"

"Not if I can help it."



As landscapes went, Firerock Mountain was not without its interesting features. Blowholes that regularly spouted flaming jets of livid red lava into the air were given a novelty by the hefty chunks of rock that would accompany this pyrotechnic display. High above their heads they

flew, defying all guesswork as to where they would fall. Since the first had landed inches from his feet, Ratar-O had long since lost any affection for the area.

"Are you sure this is where that Thundercat ship went down?"

"Yes, commander," came the assured reply of his second-in-command.

He could not fault the boy's confidence. If anywhere was likely to claim an unwary ship, then this place had to be a prime candidate. For that reason, he had kept the Ratstar at a safe distance and had himself and few choice members of crew teleported down to the surface. If there were Thundercats here, then here too would be Mumm-ra. And here would be an ideal place to reclaim his stolen weapon, the Sword of Plun-darr. When Mumm-ra had his hands full with those wretched felines, then that would be the time to take back what was his. Ratar-O still felt a glow of pride at having come up with the idea, even if he did have to share credit with his second-in-command. Ratagon's attachment to the letter of his beloved procedure had found the Thundercat vessel that was heading in this direction in a routine scan of the area around Castle Plun-darr. If he carried on like this, steps would have to be taken to clip his wings before his thoughts turned above his station. Ambition was commendable, but a challenge to the standing of his commander would never do.

For now, however, the boy's talents were not to be wasted. "Any idea where those felines would have gone?" Ratar-O asked.

"Surely, they would not have survived the crash, commander? It is well known that Thundrainium, in high enough quantities, is lethal to Thunderians. In smaller doses, it produces weakness and fatigue--"

"Yes, yes, I know all this," Ratar-O snapped irritably. If he had wanted a lesson in Thunderian physiology, he would have asked for it. The fact that Ratagon thought he needed one was further proof of the boy's growing cockiness. "I asked for an intelligent guess. That cave over there, for instance." He gestured to an opening in the towering spire of rock that gave Firerock Mountain its name. "Might they have gone there?"

Ratagon consulted his handheld scanner. "It is possible, commander. If these readings are accurate, then the amount of Thundrainium at lower levels is less considerable than here on the surface. It would indeed be a good place for a Thundercat to escape its weakening influence, if," he added, pausing for effect, "they made it this far."

"We'll never know unless we investigate," Ratar-O said. "Follow me."

The cavern was reached across a thin sliver of rock that doubled as a land bridge connecting the mountain to the canyon. Far below bubbled vast pits of lava, belching gases into the atmosphere to create a heady mix of noxious smelling odours. Although not directly affected by it, Ratar-O found the crossing a trial. He tried not to look down as the bridge narrowed in places and carefully stepped over gaping cracks in its structure. Glad to make it to the other side in one

piece, he noted that Ratagon and the others were also almost across and decided to press ahead into the cave.

Inside was bright, lit by torches that lined the walls, and pleasantly free of the smells that pervaded the outside world. A single corridor gave him no option but to follow its wending course, as it wound down to the lower levels. Here, the air was slightly foetid and stale, but spoke of recent occupation. In fact, if his nose did not deceive him, he was sure Thunderians had been here in the not too distant past.

The corridor opened out into a wider chamber, which gave access to several darkened passageways. Mindful that the torches ceased for a reason and the shadows could conceal more than rough walls, Ratar-O pulled out his twin sais and advanced cautiously down the nearest passage. A few steps in showed him the rows of doors with bars embedded in the wood to create crude windows. Most were empty, except one, in which a large, hairy individual lay unmoving on the dirty floor. If this were one of the Thunderians, then he was impressive, Ratar-O thought, making a mental note to keep this one well chained down on the journey home. From the size of his hands alone, he could make a mess of an unwary Mutant.

Someone had clearly done his job for him. All that was left was for Ratagon and the contingent of armed guards to get down here and secure the prisoners. The teleport should have no problem in penetrating the rock, which meant that another trip to the surface could be safely avoided. Then, with the prisoners in his custody, he would only have to wait for Mumm-ra to get here. A trade of their lives for the Sword of Plun-darr would be so much more civilised than having to brawl for it and carried less risk of injury in the process. Yes, Ratar-O thought with satisfaction, this was even better than his original plan.

It was until the moment when he turned from the door and an arm clamped around his neck. A palm pushed up against the side of his head and he was hauled back into the main chamber. Caught in a headlock, he was less inclined to struggle than he might have been in the grip of a lesser individual since the bulging blue biceps pressed against his chin told of its owner's obvious strength and the ease with which he could easily snap his captive's neck.

Back in the chamber, Ratar-O found that he was no longer alone. Several individuals, Thundercats by the look of them, crowded in the space. One stood apart, hands on hips, with the air of a leader about him. From what Slithe and his motley band had told him, this flame-maned person had to be the current Lord of the Thundercats, Lion-O.

"Who are you people?" Ratar-O protested, deciding that ignorance might get him further than arrogance at this stage. "How dare you! Do you know who I am?"

"No," said the one he supposed was Lion-O. "And for the moment I don't care. You have a ship?"

"Yes, but what's that got to do with anything?"

"You're going to get us out of here."

His boldness was astonishing. "Am I?" said Ratar-O. "Why would I do that?"

The Thundercat smiled. "Because you won't leave here alive if you don't agree."

His argument would have been compelling on several levels, even if the arms currently wrapped around Ratar-O's neck had been absent. This show of aggression lacked conviction, however, given that he knew, as all Mutants knew, that Thundercats were bound by a code of honour that strictly regulated their conduct, something that Ratagon would have found commendable. Their threats were empty and they had no real way of forcing him to do anything.

He was half tempted to refuse just to call their bluff, but another idea came to mind. These fools were blindly offering themselves up into his custody, believing that they had convinced him they had the upper hand. Once they were aboard the Ratstar, it would be easy enough to turn the tables and acquire for himself a clutch of Thundercats as prisoners since he noticed none of them had brandished any weapons apart from brute strength at this point. He could gamble that they were without arms. All he had to do was play along with this charade and let them walk straight into his trap. As easy as shooting fish in a barrel, Ratar-O thought to himself.

"I agree," he said, adding a touch of nervousness to his voice. "Only don't hurt me."

"We won't," came a voice in his ear from the individual who held him, "as long as you are a good little rat and do exactly what we say."

"I will. Where do you want to go?"

"Mumm-ra's Pyramid," said their leader. "He took something from us, and we want it back."

Now that was interesting, Ratar-O thought. So, Mumm-ra did not confine his larceny to Mutants alone.

"This must be a very important something," Ratar-O said, unable to contain his curiosity.

"It is. Take us there and then you and your ship will be free. What are you doing here anyway?"

A fair question that merited a fair answer, which of course Ratar-O had no intention of providing. "Just passing," he lied.

"You know Slithe?"

"Only by reputation, such as it is." He eyed Lion-O with a begrudging respect that he feigned to perfection. "I would expect to find that reptilian skulking in an out of the way dump like this, but Thundercats? This is a surprise."

Lion-O chose to ignore that remark. "How did you get here? Your ship did not land."

"No, we have teleport facilities. We do not have to land."

"Then contact your ship. The sooner we leave, the better."

That was a sentiment with which Ratar-O could agree whole-heartedly. Then, just as things seemed to be going so well, Ratagon came blundering into the chamber and things took a turn for the worse. The Thundercats scuttled behind Ratar-O and his captor, leaving him facing a wall of weapons with a startled looking Ratagon trying to make up his mind whether to order them to shoot or not.

"Don't you dare, you fool!" Ratar-O hissed.

Ratagon immediately backed down. "What shall I do, commander?"

"Contact the ship and tell them to take us up. To take us **all** up, Ratagon. Our guests will be coming with us."

He stiffened to attention and saluted. Ratar-O felt himself groan. This did not bode well.

"I'm afraid I can't do that, sir. Regulation 2A states categorically that the ship and her crew shall not be put in danger by the teleporting of hostiles aboard."

Damn the boy for coming up with something like that. "And what about the danger I'm in, you hairless tailed cretin? Take us up, those are my orders!"

"Can't do that, sir," Ratagon persisted. "Regulation 4B states that when the commander of the ship is compromised, then the second-in-command must take control."

"You weasel!" Ratar-O roared. "I'll have your hide for this!"

"Sir, my hands are tied. Regulations state--"

"Hang regulations! I'm ordering you to take us up. Do it, or you'll never see Plun-darr again!"

"Listen, son," said his captor. "I'll make it easy for you. Take us where we want to go and then you'll have your ship back. Think of it as helping out your new friends."

Ratagon swallowed. "But you're Thunderians."

"Do it, Ratagon," Ratar-O commanded. "I'll take responsibility for this."

Still he hesitated, but suddenly making up his mind, he activated his communicator and gave the necessary command. A few seconds later, Ratar-O found himself back on his ship, faced with the surprised looks of his crew and feeling humiliated beyond belief. It was a sensation that only grew as he was marched to the flight deck and sat firmly down in his chair. His captor, a great blue panther, took up position behind him and stood with arms folded, waiting for any sign of trouble. The heading was given and the Ratstar set out on its new course. From the predicted transport time, Ratar-O knew he didn't have long to endure this indignity.

In the time he had, however, he studied these felines who had given Slithe and the others such a hard time. They were brawny, like most Thunderians, and possessed of keen intelligence, although he could see no particular reason why that should help them carry the day over similarly endowed Mutants. He remembered Slithe's talk of a sword, no evidence of which he could see at present. The thought occurred that perhaps that was the reason for this trip to Mumm-ra's domain. If so, Ratar-O was sure Mumm-ra was going to have a fight on his hands. And while he was otherwise occupied, a certain Sword of Plun-darr would be taken from him. Perhaps it would be best to continue the charade and not overpower them now, Ratar-O mused.

"Coming up on the location now, sir," Ratagon said, punching up an image of a massive black pyramid on the forward viewscreen. "Orders, sir?"

"Well?" Ratar-O said, looking to Lion-O. "What now?"

"Can you put us down inside that pyramid?"

Ratagon consulted his scanners and shook his head. "There appears to be an energy field around the structure. I'm afraid the best we can do is to put you down outside."

"Then that will have to do."

"What about him?" said the one stood behind him, who the others had called Panthro. "We should take him with us as insurance."

"Why?" Ratar-O asked. "We did as you asked. How about keeping up your end of the bargain?"

"We will," said Panthro. "Except I'm a suspicious kind of guy who wouldn't trust you as far as I could throw you. You're coming with us to make sure your crew behaves."

Ratar-O fought back a smile, for they were playing right into his hands. They unwittingly were doing exactly what he wanted, for he would be close at hand when the battle commenced. All the better for taking back what was rightfully his and avoiding the whole business of dealing with Mumm-Ra directly. After he had his sword back, **then** he'd put those cats in their place and maybe gain the Sword of Omens to take back to Plun-Darr where it belonged.

"As you wish," he said. "Shall we go?"

When the blue light of the teleported faded, he found himself knee deep in sand. Desert winds whipped around him, howling at the walls of the steep sided edifice. It was impressive, he had to admit, if a little pretentious for one who looked as though he needed a good meal rather than a draughty old building like this.

Panthro had taken up residence at his side as his permanent guard, while Lion-O and the two women were searching for something in the walls of the pyramid. The three others, who did not wear the insignia, stood shivering a little distance away. They had his sympathy.

“How much longer?” Ratar-O grumbled. “I’ve better things to do than stand here all day.”

“I’m sure you have,” said Panthro. “But here you’ll stay till we say otherwise.”

He was halfway to preparing a smart remark to that when Lion-O returned, saying he had found a way into the structure. A push to his back made sure Ratar-O complied and followed them into a dark passage, littered with the grime of millennia and spiders as large as baby snarfs.

“Wait here,” Lion-O said to the three shivering Thunderians. “Tygra will be here soon with the Thundertank. Tell him where we’ve gone.”

The name struck a chord and Ratar-O remembered it from the flight deck, when the Thundercats had used the ship’s communicator to signal one of their friends. Presumably once they had transport of their own, he would be released. But hopefully, they would find their freedom snatched from them once he was able to get the upper hand.

The corridor opened out into a vast chamber in which their footsteps echoed around the four solid walls. In the centre was a large circular pool, filled with a heaving liquid, around which stood four large pillars. On a dais at its furthest end was an upright sarcophagus in a skull-like opening.

“I’ll bet that’s where Mumm-ra has the Sword of Omens,” said Panthro. “He won’t give it up without a fight, you know.”

“That’s fine by me,” said Lion-O. “I have a few tricks up my sleeve that should slow him down.”

“Against the undead?” said Ratar-O. “This **will** be interesting. How did you come by this information?”

Lion-O was reluctant to answer, but the female he had heard him calling Felina was less reticent. “It comes from a very good source. We travelled back in time and...” She fell into silence as Panthro waved a cautionary hand in her direction.

“Time travel,” said Ratar-O. “You are people of many hidden talents indeed.”

“Indeed, we are,” Lion-O muttered. “Panthro, stay here with him. I’m going to see if Mumm-ra is anywhere around.”

Ratar-O watched as he set off towards the sarcophagus. By the time he had reached it, there was still no sign of the mummy.

“Panthro, help me here,” he called. “Felina and Cheetara, keep your eye on Ratar-O.”

“Don’t mind me,” Ratar-O said as Panthro left his side. “You go and do what you have to.”

That seemed to involve heaving the great lid of the sarcophagus to one side, a manoeuvre that required a good deal of effort on both their parts. Seeing them struggling, the other female left to help, leaving him alone with Felina. She was nervous and fighting to divide her attention between him and what was happening over on the dais. Ratar-O smiled to himself at his change in fortunes. When the time came, she would be easy to overcome.

And so, he was content to wait until a bolt of red lightning came out of nowhere and sent her friends skittering away from the sarcophagus. As Mumm-ra descended into the chamber, Ratar-O saw his chance and pushed Felina to the ground. Running to the shadows, he hid behind a pillar and waited to see what would happen next.

“Foolish Thundercats!” Mumm-ra roared, landing lightly on the edge of the cauldron. “That you come here to my domain to challenge me!”

“You have the Sword of Omens,” said Lion-O. “I want it back.”

Mumm-ra laughed. “And I want you gone from Third Earth forever, but it seems that what we want and what we get are two very different things.”

“We’ll see about that.”

No sooner were the words out of his mouth than Lion-O was up on his feet and running for cover. Mumm-ra’s energy bolts followed him all the way, directed from his free left hand, whilst the other held a short, curled object, which Ratar-O immediately recognised as the Sword of Plun-darr. With Mumm-ra intent on pursuing the Thundercats around his pyramid, all it seemed Ratar-O had to do was to wait until he passed close enough to grab the Sword.

His heart was in his mouth when the sorcerer finally came within his reach. As he tracked a Thundercat across the chamber with a fiery blast of energy, Ratar-O took a step from his hiding place and extended his hand towards the hilt of the Sword of Plun-darr. With his fingers inches away, it was within his grasp. All it needed was courage and a little luck.

He had the courage, but his luck ran out.

Some sense had told Mumm-ra of his approach and time seemed to stand still as he watched the twin blades of the Sword of Plun-darr unfurl and extend. Too close to avoid it, one of the blades slashed out at him, tearing at his clothes and ripping his flesh asunder.



It happened too quickly for Lion-O to call out a warning.

As loathsome as the rat was, he had no wish to see Ratar-O disembowelled by the deadly weapon that Mumm-ra carried. Too late to stop the inevitable, he could only watch in horror as a red line was drawn across the rat's middle by the sword's jagged blade. Blood dribbled from between the hands that Ratar-O clasped to the wound and the look on his face spoke of his shock. He had tried and he had failed. Whether it had cost him his life was another matter. With whatever strength of mind he had left, Ratar-O activated his communicator and disappeared in a pool of blue light. Clearly, either his crew had been lying about the energy field around the pyramid or Mumm-ra had compassion enough to drop his defences to allow a mortally wounded ally to be rescued. It had to be the former; Lion-O seriously doubted whether Mumm-ra had any compassion left in that withered soul of his.

It had, however, worked to his advantage. Mumm-ra was shaken enough to send his shots wide when Lion-O dashed across the pyramid and took refuge behind the sarcophagus. Their combined efforts had succeeded in opening up a crack just big enough for him to get his hand inside. Feeling around, his fingers touched and closed around metal. He pulled his hand out and with it came the Sword of Omens, growling furiously behind the bandage that had forced the Eye of Thundera shut.

The bandage came away with ease and Lion-O noted with satisfaction the look on Mumm-ra's face when he saw his prize taken from him.

"You cannot best me with that weapon, cub, not now I have the Sword of Plun-darr," he sneered. "Give it up, Lion-O, and I'll grant you a quick death."

His reply was to call upon the powers of the Sword of Omens. Bright blue energy hurtled towards Mumm-ra and impacted on the spinning blades of the Sword of Plun-darr. Mumm-ra laughed and just as easily batted away the best of Lion-O's efforts. Clearly, it was time for something a little more underhanded.

"You're too confident, Mumm-ra," Lion-O called to him. "You think you are so secure with that weapon, but what about the horror of your own reflection?"

Before Mumm-ra could react, he twisted the blade of the Sword of Omens and offered it up for the sorcerer's inspection. The smile dropped from the mummy's face when he beheld his own image, but soon it was back and Mumm-ra was laughing again.

"Nice try, cub, but I learn," he said. "The Ancient Spirits of Evil have freed me of that inconvenience. I learn, but you have not!"

Lion-O found himself flying through the air as an energy blast lifted him clean from his feet. His back smashed into a pillar and snatched the breath from his body and clarity from his mind. He was aware of Mumm-ra's approach, but his body had decided that it had had enough for one day. His muscles would not respond and all he could do was to sit and wait for whatever lay in store for him.

As the swirling blades came inches from his nose, his thoughts turned to the other Thundercats. He had got them away from Firerock Mountain, only to deliver them into the hands of their greatest enemy. He hoped forlornly that they were beating a hasty retreat away from this place. His gut told him, however, that they were probably very close at hand.

He was right.

Suddenly from out of the shadows, Panthro hurled himself, left foot leading, at Mumm-ra's head. Taken by surprise, the blow sent Mumm-ra crashing to the floor. His weapon collapsed and folded in on itself. With the advantage back in his hands, Lion-O forced himself to his feet and, just as Mumm-ra seemed on the point of recovery, hit him with the full force of the Sword of Omen's powers. Under the onslaught, before his eyes, the old sorcerer withered to an undignified heap of loose skin and draping bandages.

"You have won this day," he whispered hoarsely. "But Mumm-ra lives forever!"

With his final declaration of defiance over, Mumm-ra dragged himself back to sarcophagus. It opened to welcome him and enclosed him within. It was over, for the time being at least. They would have to save their knowledge of Mumm-Ra's past against him some other time, it seemed, which suited Lion-O well enough. It was a long shot, anyway.

"Let's go home," said Lion-O. "Is everyone all right?"

"Tired as hell," said Panthro, giving him a hearty clap on the back, "and glad it's all over."

Outside, the air smelt sweet compared to the musty aroma of death and decay in the heart of the pyramid. Even better was the sight of the Thundertank, with Tygra talking to their three new friends. Seeing them emerge from the passage, he came hurrying over.

"I was just on my way. What happened? Are you all right?"

The question was of course directed as much to Cheetara as anyone else. She soothed away his concern and he took her in his arms and shared a silent moment of thanks for her return to him. It was a nice gesture and Lion-O felt the urge to do the same to Felina. But like Panthro, he just felt too tired. They still had to get home and make room for the three Thunderians. Shows of emotion could wait. Besides, he wasn't sure that she would appreciate the sentiment.



That evening, Felina was glad to be back home at Cat's Lair, which, she realized really felt like home more than ever now. It was also good to have the whole exhausting mission of finding the lost countrymen put behind them. Tygra, though glad to see they'd all made it back alive, had

been disheartened to learn the Feliner was lost. He seemed to bounce back well enough, reminding himself and everyone else, that he still had the blueprints and they could always gather materials again and rebuild – the important thing, he had said on the way home, was that everyone was alright. This was one of the many things she admired about Tygra – his optimism. Lion-O, by contrast, spent a lot of the ride home not at all trying to mask the fact that he was spent and if she didn't know any better, he was also brooding. Despite everything, the outcome of the day had been favorable enough, but that, it seemed wasn't good enough for Lion-O. As far as she was concerned, he put too much pressure on himself and didn't make enough allowances for the fact that he – nor any of them – was perfect. Taking things in stride and looking to the brighter side of things seemed foreign to her husband, and Felina couldn't help but compare him to the older and seemingly wiser tiger.

She also noticed the reunion between Cheetara and Tygra, and longed for the same for herself, but again, Lion-O was sending out signals that he was closed to the matter. But then who could blame him? With the way she'd been rebuffing and rebuking all shows of concern out of him, he probably didn't have the energy for more of her hostility. So, for that, she did not blame him. Actually, she hadn't blamed him for anything. If his brooding was borne of any guilt, Felina thought that it shouldn't be. She'd been the one who insisted upon going on the mission, knowing full well about the dangers. He surely could not save her from herself.

At least she'd heeded some of his advice and left the Book of Omens safe at the Lair or it would have been one more thing to fight Mumm-Ra for.

But more than anything, she'd been concerned about Lion-O's health. Grune had not done much to her but give her an infinite case of the creeps but watching the beating Lion-O took at his hands had been heartbreaking. Not even her knowledge of natural healing agents would help him much, so it was fortunate indeed that Pumyra, with her more traditional approach to medicine, was on hand for the long ride home to patch Lion-O up with what they had in the medical kit inside the Tank.

Now she waited in her nightgown inside his room for him. He was in sick bay getting a thorough exam at the more expert hands of Tygra before coming to bed. She wondered if he'd be surprised to find her there, having given up her private quarters to Pumyra until they could expand accommodations for their guests. She'd even referenced the space as her "old room" as not to call attention to the odd arrangement she and Lion-O had going in an effort to spare him any embarrassment. Although, she could tell by the quizzical look on the young puma's face that she wondered why all of Felina's belongings were yet in the space but had been too polite to outwardly question a Thundercat. In fact, the new trio acted as though they were unworthy of even staying as guests at the Lair, and it was only Lion-O's heavy persuasion that made them relent. Tradition was a fine thing, and on Thundera, it was indeed rare for citizens to be lodged at the Lair. However, with their numbers on Third Earth so few and the dangers looming large staying inside the protective fortress could far better protect the trio. Knowing that, they finally agreed to the unusual set-up.

The door opening brought Felina out of her mental recap of the post-battle aftermath. She stood up from her perch on the edge of the bed to greet a weary Lion-O as he entered. He did a mild double take upon seeing her there, and surprise registered on his expression.

“I thought you’d already be in bed, asleep after the day we had,” he remarked as he walked past her to ready himself for sleep. Not that he did much but shuck off his belt, pants, top and boots before sliding under the covers of his bed. It wounded her to see the marks Grune’s cruelty had left on his nearly nude body evident in almost any area not covered by bandages or his underpants. Various cuts, scrapes, and bruises mottled his skin and Felina felt a wave of sympathy and the urge to nurture him.

“I was waiting for you,” she replied, smiling only slightly. “Are you okay?”

Lion-O turned his head and eyed her with curiosity, though she noted a hint of dread, too. No doubt he worried they’d have words again and obviously, he was in no mood for more conflict of any sort. His response was to sigh and wait for her to lay it on him.

She sat down on the edge of the bed again and faced him. “Look, I hope you don’t mind, but I let Pumyra have my room for now. So, I was hoping I could sleep in here. With you.” Felina bit her lip and waited for his reaction.

He was quiet for a moment, and then struggled a bit to sit up. “Okay, I’ll go have Snarf bring in a cot for me to sleep on,” he offered generously.

She placed a firm hand on his chest to stop him from getting out of bed. “Don’t be silly. We’re mature enough to share this bed, don’t you think?”

The truth was that after a day like they had experienced, whether Pumyra needed a space to stay or not, she’d likely be here asking to sleep beside him anyway. The events had spooked her enough to want him near at the very least, a reaction she’d had increasingly more since Bela’s passing.

He nodded his approval, though Felina felt it was more out of a sense to avoid arguing the point coupled with the obvious fact that he was too drained to bother with last minute accommodations anyway. No matter, she was grateful for the cooperation.

Spurred on by the show of goodwill, she reached out and gingerly touched the side of his bandaged face where he’d been wounded the worst, and this time he didn’t stop her. Tears sprang up in her eyes, and there were a million things on the cusp of her lips begging to be said. Despite all their problems, she knew she still had feelings for Lion-O and none of Grune’s taunts to that effect were true to her heart. Lion-O had not ruined her life, and she would much rather be Jaga’s child than daughter of one such as Grune. Felina blamed their rushed union and circumstances coupled with their youth more than anything for the breakdown of their relationship, and had it been another time and place, she liked to fancy they could make it work. Lion-O was a good man, more than Grune could ever be, and one she was proud to know. She

couldn't bear to look at him in that cavern – it was too hard to see him suffer, and it was torture to imagine she might witness his life being taken from him.

Of all the things she wanted to say in that moment, only this managed to make it out of the tangled web of emotions she felt in the form of a raspy plea: “Don't ever leave us.”

Lion-O reached up and gently took her hand in his. “I plan to beat the slim odds and grow old with the lot of you,” he assured her with a small, knowing smile.

She couldn't help but return the smile, hoping that his confidence was not overstated. She leaned over to turn off the bedside lamp, plunging them both into near darkness if not for the sake of a little pale moonlight, its glow hampered by thin cloud cover outside.

Still clasping her hand, he pulled her close to him as he reclined back to rest on his pillow. Felina quietly accepted this gesture, and willfully rested her head on his broad chest while drawing her body close to him. She was content to lie there and listen to his heartbeat, which at first was going at a fast pace but soon slowed into a gentle, slower rhythm as he relaxed.

Felina felt comfortable and safe and was about to drift off to sleep when he spoke to her. “Did you have Tygra or Pumyra look you over?” he asked, unable to help himself. “I'm just worried about the Thundrainium exposure on you and the baby.”

It was a question she might have taken offense to earlier, but right now, she could not fault him for being concerned. He was only guilty of caring, Felina realized, even if it seemed he was operating under the assumption that she somehow did not know what was best for herself or the child. She concluded that he meant well. It was sweet, in a way, that even in his condition his thoughts were with her.

Felina lifted herself and turned so that she could look at his face in the faint light and gave him a wisp of a reassuring smile. “I haven't, but I will, first thing in the morning. I promise.” Actually, she felt fine and she was quite sure, the baby would be fine as well as it was still so early on in the pregnancy. Not even the harsh shove she received courtesy of Ratar-O left much of a lingering mark on her. But if it would ease his mind, then she supposed there was no harm in being cautious.

However, he seemed to have caught on to the overtones in his query and was now pursuing apologies. “Felina, I'm sorry if I seem out of line or anything. I just—“

On impulse, Felina leaned down and kissed him softly to silence him. She was about to break away to offer some reassurances of her own but found he'd buried a hand into the short locks behind her head in an effort to keep her there and intensify the embrace.

Rather than fight it or worry about the consequences to their fledgling relationship, Felina chose not to overanalyze it in favor of getting lost in the moment. It felt good in his arms, and his kisses were passionate enough to stir feelings within her she'd too long tried to deny and push aside. As worn as he was, she didn't think he'd have the energy to take it too far anyway. He quickly

indicated otherwise when he brought them both up on their sides to take a more commanding position. He then boldly ran his hand down her body, stopping at the bodice of her gown to skillfully untie the ribbon that held the neckline in a more modest position. With the fabric falling open and hanging daringly loose, he slipped his hand inside to massage one of her exposed breasts.

He stoked a fire below her belly that surprised her with its intensity and she only hoped he would not stop short again. For a moment, she thought he might when he pulled back, putting an end to their kissing. She looked at him almost pleadingly until she noticed he might be in some measure of discomfort from his ordeal. No, she didn't want him to hurt himself, and laid back on her own pillow in quiet resignation.

Just when she started to convince herself this was for the best anyway, he surprised her when he moved on to setting a trail of blazing kisses down her neck while his hands worked to free her from her gown. She could scarcely catch her breath but did manage to let out a strained moan of approval. Clearing her mind of all nagging voices from her conscience and thoughts of third parties, she and Lion-O became the only two people in the world as she surrendered herself to him completely.



Groggy, Grune propped himself up with his forearms and looked around the empty cavern. It took him a moment to clear his head enough to focus on anything, but the bitterness came rushing back when he saw the room devoid of his precious captives. He grunted and tried to think of how his plan went wrong.

This was the perfect place to carry out the plan; there was no dispute there. He was not affected by Thundrainium, a trait that once made him an asset to the Thundercats' team. It was an advantage he loved to use against them now. He, being of the more feral "purebloods" – or as the more ignorant liked to tag his kind, throwbacks – was what gave him this coveted advantage. It was once touted by his kind that the mixing with the humans that journeyed with their ancestors and other alien races weakened the 'Cats and caused this deadly vulnerability to what they eventually dubbed "Thundrainium". Their pursuit of vanity, and to look more human, was rightfully dooming them, some said. Grune and his ilk looked more beastly as did those they called "Mutants", and many were shunned by the more mainstreamed Thunderians. Of course, if they had a "use" then that was a different story. Many earned places like that of guards outside Thundera City for the resistance to Thundrainium meant an intruder looking for easy access had to come up with a better plan. Grune only saw that as leaving his kind on the outside perimeter, a literal showing of how the hierarchy happily marched along.

He'd experienced the sting of this stigma as a child and as he got older, though yes, not all Thunderians were so shallow. But there was enough to make growing up difficult and make

trusting in the others difficult as well. His kind also possessed a brute strength unlike even the likes of Panthro or other similarly touted strong men possessed and this, Grune always thought, was another reason throwbacks were feared.

So, imagine his pride when he worked hard to live by their rules, play their socio-political games, and rise above all the ignorance to become a part of the most esteemed group of Thunderians ever revered – a Thundercat. Back then he had a clear focus and a true purpose. He believed in the Code. He believed he'd finally arrived and that he'd made new and lasting friends, ones that would never betray him. Surely those standing for such lofty ideals would not have an ulterior motive for letting the likes of him into their fold. What a fool he'd been to think they were somehow above it.

But first, he betrayed himself when he took Leonda as a bride. She, a lioness of more traditional and coveted features he took as a mate. And he felt the pressure from other throwbacks that thought he'd put them back several millennia by picking such a woman as a wife, rather than welcoming a feral female into his marriage bed.

It may have been easy enough to ignore their grumbling, but within himself he had his own ulterior motives for choosing Leonda. As far as he'd come, a part of him still wanted his offspring to not bear the same burden he had to. Yes, it was true. He'd wanted a son or daughter that looked more "normal", that fit into the world better. He hated his brethren for honing in on that for it was a betrayal to them as much as it was to himself because it was an admission of a shame for being who he was.

That was the beginning of the end. It all tumbled over quickly from there, so to fully blame Jaga and the Council and everything that came after was probably not entirely true, Grune thought as he rubbed the back of his neck and staggered to his feet. The pretty ones had sucked him in too, and he foolishly saw it as some kind of opportunity to let the next generation in on an easier life path. And yet, he soon found that their outward appearance often betrayed what was inside of them. He should have left well enough alone and took pride in who he was and the purity of his genetics. But no, he still pursued Leonda against his better instincts, fooling himself. Fooling himself into thinking he could be loved by one of them and truly accepted. He had succeeded in simply making a fool of himself.

However, he'd questioned a lot of things he'd seen once he was on the inside, instead of on the outside looking in. And that Sword he saw Mumm-Ra with! It flashed in Grune's mind where he had seen it before. Before he'd become a Thundercat, a much younger Jaga had wrested that Sword from a Mutant named Ratilla who had tried to steal the Treasure of Thundera. Jaga then threw the blade into a molten river on Thundera, assigning it to sink melted to the very core of the planet. Almost, in an odd twist of fate, what nearly befell the Sword of Omens earlier that day. This is the triumphant story he'd heard throughout his training, a story meant to spur pride and purpose for the upcoming Thundercats. He'd seen the artwork of a smug Jaga, holding the

twin bladed scourge of a weapon proudly above his head before dropping it to the bubbling depths.

There was always some sort of jingoism evident in their structure, some sort of bullshit they fed the commoners to keep them in check and keep the power and riches at the top. That Sword of Plun-Darr victory was one of the most memorable. They saw justice in permanently disarming their enemies but cry when the same is done to them? Sure, there was a nice sentiment and a holier-than-thou moral code they liked to spout to make it look good, but the Council on Thundera was like anything else, with absolute power corrupting and chipping away at the so-called values. He was already edging back toward serving only himself for he was fast realizing that he was the only one looking out for himself anyway. His “friends” liked him around when some super strength was needed or Thundrainium was involved, but other than that, he still strongly felt he was operating on the fringes of their social circle and merely tolerated. All that scrapping his way up to become a Thundercat despite his lack of noble birth meant nothing, apparently. He’d proved nothing to them or himself, really, and the disappointment ate at him in those days.

The final straw was what went on behind his back at the Lair while he was gone, after he’d wed Leonda. Even if Jaga hadn’t realized Leonda was his wife until it was too late, he still allowed the Council to judge Grune as they had, to exile him. No sympathy, no words in his defence and most of all, no acceptance from Jaga for his part in the sordid affair. At least, not to Grune’s satisfaction. So yes, that event had been the summation of it all, the bitter pill that he’d never get rid of the taste. And it fuelled what his life – whether in spirit or in flesh – had become focused on ever since that fateful slap to the face. If he could not get to Jaga himself and lay down some old-fashioned vigilante justice, then he would do what he told that cub. He’d destroy everything Jaga ever loved, starting with Lion-O.

With renewed resolve, Grune stomped toward the door and laughed to find it locked. He lifted his club and with a powerful blow, turned the wooden door into a pile of splinters. Stepping through the gaping hole, he looked around the darkened corridor outside and surmised his captives were long gone.

It was no matter. He had his entire life to see his mission through. And this time he wouldn’t make the same mistake he just had, and the mistake Lion-O had as well by letting Grune live. If ever he had the Lord cub at his mercy again, there would be no toying or taunting.

Lion-O’s destruction was now the sole focus of Grune’s quest for revenge. Even if it took months, years, decades it would be done. He would never stop trying. After that, every last one of those hypocrites would pay in their own special, painful way.

His enraged roar echoed through the empty hallway, heralding his new resolve.

*I'm becoming less defined as days go by
Fading away
And well you might say
I'm losing focus
Kinda drifting into the abstract in terms of how I see myself*

*Sometimes I think I can see right through myself
Sometimes I can see right through myself*

*Less concerned about fitting into the world
Your world that is
Cause it doesn't really matter anymore
(no it doesn't really matter anymore)
No it doesn't really matter anymore
None of this shit really matters anymore*

*Yes I am alone but then again I always was
As far back as I can tell
I think maybe it's because
Because you were never really real to begin with
I just made you up to hurt myself*

*I just made you up to hurt myself, yeah
And I just made you up to hurt myself*

*And it worked.
Yes it did!*

*There is no you
There is only me
There is no you
There is only me
There is no fucking you
There is only ME
There is no fucking you
There is only ME*

Only

*Well the tiniest little dot caught my eye and it turned out to be a scab
And I had this funny feeling like I just knew it's something bad
I just couldn't leave it alone, I kept picking at the scab
It was a doorway trying to seal itself shut
But I climbed through*

*Now I am somewhere I am not supposed to be, and I can see things I know I really shouldn't see
And now I know why, now, now, now I know why
Things aren't as pretty
On the inside*

*There is no you
There is only me
There is no you
There is only me
There is no fucking you
There is only ME
There is no fucking you
There is only ME*

Only

--Only, Nine Inch Nails