

In A Magic World

By Purrsia Kat & Spaced Angel

The last of the winter snows were long gone and spring was claiming Third Earth once more. Green buds were burgeoning on bare branches and the meadows had become a sea of white and yellow as flowers flourished under the growing heat of the sun. The return of life showed itself in the fawns that timidly followed their mothers on the edges of the forest and the brightly coloured butterflies that flitted from petal to petal. Light breezes lifted their slight weight into the air and spiralled them upwards to rest on a rough window ledge as they caught their breath. A second later, Slithe's hand smashed down on them and their brief existence came to an end.

Such was life, Slithe thought, examining the blue-red mess and tangle of broken legs that had been plastered to his palm. So fragile and so easily crushed, and no creature, however superior they thought themselves, could escape that reality. A grim smile came to his features as he reflected that had Ratar-O learned that lesson a little sooner, he would not be lying out in the cold earth right now.

Even he had to admit to a certain amount of shock when they had discovered the bodies of Ratar-O and his aide, Ratagon. A good deal of nonsense had been bandied about concerning their deaths. The double suicide theory that the others championed had seemed unlikely to Slithe. As much as he detested the rat, he had always grudgingly admired his survival instincts. Killing himself because his family's position at the top of the heap had been toppled seemed out of character and it took Vultureman to prove it. Ever the logical one, the vulture had confidently announced that Ratagon shot Ratar-O and then himself. When pressed for evidence, Vultureman had been reticent, although if Slithe had to guess, he would have said that the vulture had been listening outside the door.

Whatever the truth, master and aide were buried together, since the cretins he had ordered to dig the graves had been too lazy to make two holes. Now, the barren earth that had become their home for eternity was showing life of its own. Beyond the swampy land surrounding the Castle, sparse patches of grass were starting to cover the mound, bringing with them meadow flowers. There had to be a certain irony in that, not that Ratar-O would have appreciated it. For someone who'd had little time for such trivialities as flora when alive, at least now he had forever to appreciate them. Perhaps it was some sort of divine judgement upon him. The flowers would stay, despite Jackalman's whining that it didn't seem right. After all, Slithe had decided, who was he

to meddle with the wishes of a higher power? They had enough problems without incurring the wrath of anyone else.

At least one set of problems had come to a satisfactory conclusion. With the death of Ratilla and Plun-darr in the grip of civil war over who next should take the crown, the fate of a few failed Mutants on Third Earth was no longer of any interest. Slithe hoped not even the lure of the Sword of Omens would draw them back. Not that Slithe took any responsibility for his perceived lack of success in his original command. He would have liked to see anyone take on the Thundercats and that sword of theirs and come out on top. For all Ratar-O's boasting about his superior intellect, he too had failed. Third Earth seemed to have that effect on people. It bestowed its favours only on the chosen few, a category which seemed firmly closed to any of Mutant kind.

Or did it, he had to wonder. It seemed to have a knack of protecting its own, even those it had adopted. Not too long ago, he had faced the prospect of being hauled back to Plun-darr to face charges of gross incompetence. He'd had no doubt about the outcome, and yet the tables turned. Ratar-O was dead, and he was alive. If ever the question of their failure did again come to the fore, Ratar-O had provided him with the best defence in the world. How could he, a lowly commander, be expected to triumph against better armed forces in difficult conditions when the grandson of the then king had also failed? At least Ratar-O had proved himself useful for something, if not in the way he'd expected.

Perhaps someone up there did like him, he thought, casting a glance skywards as he licked the butterfly mulch from his palm. Slithe also considered it fortunate that Grune once again made himself scarce around Castle Plundarr after he again had failed miserably to bring Lion-O down. It made for one less cook in the kitchen, a phrase that made Slithe wince as soon as the thought crossed his mind. He'd never go back to being nothing, not like he'd been when he was spooning slop to the mindless morons in the Plundarrian armies, and neither Ratar-O nor Grune the Destroyer were going to change that.

It was about time his luck changed, he'd decided, and if at the expense of the Thundercats, then so much the better. After all, wasn't that cub expected some time soon? If so, he'd have to think about how to exploit Lion-O's latest weakness. Just how much was that child's life worth to him, he wondered. Perhaps, the price of the Sword of Omens? Children and wives could be great leverage, but then, if Lion-O was as foolishly loyal as his comrade Panthro had been, he might just choose the Sword over his family. There was only one way to find out.

With that thought in mind, he turned from the window just in time to see Vultureman entering the room.

The vulture regarded him critically in his narrow-eyed manner. "You look happy, Slithe," he said, turning the remark into a sneer. "Something you'd like to share with the rest of us?"

"Not with you," he growled in reply.

"Then what's so funny or are you becoming half-witted in your old age?"

The annoyance rang clear in Vultureman's voice and Slithe chuckled at the effect he had upon him. "When I've made up my mind, you'll be the first to know," he said as he waddled past him. "Until then, you'd be wise to keep out of my way, bird brain. Things are going to be changing around here, yes."

"I can hardly wait," came the lacklustre reply.

Normally this lack of faith would have sent him into an apoplexy, but today Slithe ignored it. Change was in the wind and he was sure it was blowing his way. He could afford to tolerate that insolent cretin a little longer. When he returned to Castle Plun-darr bearing the Sword of Omens in triumph, then they would see who was in charge around here. Those who didn't like it would have to go. He for one would not be standing in their way.



Velouria giggled and dabbed her tiny hand to her mouth.

"You're thirsty?" Cheetara said, picking the child up and imitating the action. Velouria copied her and smiled with delight when a bottle came her way. She latched onto it and drank deeply, dimples showing in her cheeks as she sucked the fluid into her mouth.

Cheetara watched her as she enjoyed her liquid lunch, pleased that they were making some headway in the difficult business of communication. Velouria was almost one and already showing a keen intelligence that Cheetara liked to think she got as much from her as her brainy father. It had been Tygra's idea to try a form of sign language with her, mostly, she guessed, as a way of relieving some of his guilt for his perceived failure to fashion a functioning hearing aid for her.

Since then, Velouria had quickly learned that a simple hand signal could get her what she wanted far quicker than all the crying in the world. Thirst and hunger had been the first on her list, followed by tiredness and cuddles and toys. All those were easy enough to understand, but Cheetara had been initially puzzled when Velouria had put her hands to the sides of her head and waggled her fingers. Only when Snarf entered the room and she wailed with excitement did it become clearer. She wondered if Snarf entirely appreciated the gesture and was happy to know that he himself had taught it to her.

Lost in her contemplation of her daughter, she almost jumped when a hand came to rest on her shoulder.

"Don't do that," she chided.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you," said Tygra. "She's a thirsty girl."

"Where have you been? I thought you were having Velouria this afternoon."

He sighed and rubbed his eyes, making them redder than they had been a moment ago. "Sorry, Cheetara, I was busy. I meant to, but I didn't have the time."

Time seemed to be a preciously short commodity lately. The redesign and subsequent building of the Feliner had kept him away for too many nights. Her reasoning that the Rat Star had not been seen since that horrible day at Fire Rock Mountain, and so perhaps production could slow a tad went unheeded. When he did have time to spare, he seemed to be torn between struggling with the faults in the hearing device he was constructing for Velouria and his duties around the Lair. Then there were the lessons he somehow managed to fit in with Felina in their pursuit of Thundera's ancient language. All these things Cheetara knew to be important, but she could not help but regret the loss of their time together. Taking him to task about it would only add to the burden she knew he already carried. What he needed instead was understanding.

For now, she smiled and leaned across to kiss him. "I forgive you," she said. "We missed you though. We've been having lots of fun this afternoon."

"You have?" He sprawled on the bed behind her and traced a finger down the line of her spine, making her shiver. "Tell me all about it."

"We had a bath and made bubble monsters."

"You did? That does sound like fun."

Cheetara removed the bottle from Velouria's mouth and wiped away the dribbles of milk that escaped from the corners of her lips. "And then we looked at the pictures in one of daddy's books, didn't we?"

"Oh?" said Tygra. "Which one?"

"'Legends of the Ancients', I think it was," she said, idly glancing across the room to the desk where the heavy tome lay. "I had no idea what it was about, but the pictures were pretty good."

Tygra grunted. "Most of it is death and destruction."

"Not suitable reading material for Velouria then?"

"No, not for her or you." He grinned and sat up, snaking his arm around her waist. "Cheetara, I know I've been distant lately, but I'm hoping that will change very soon."

She waited for him to explain.

"Felina and I have been going over the information she and Lion-O gleaned about Mumm-ra's past from that trip they took back in time. We think we may have found something that could potentially destroy his power."

Cheetara turned to face him. "You have? What?"

He paused. "It's risky."

"How so?"

He spent a long time straightening out the rumpled sheet on which he lay before replying. "It would involve going to Mumm-ra's pyramid."

"Not you alone?"

"Oh, no, quite a few of us." He bit his lip. "Although that would probably include me, yes."

"And me?"

He looked up. "Probably."

She knew now why he had been so hesitant to tell her. Going to Mumm-ra's pyramid was not conducive to good health and long lives. Venturing into the heart of evil always carried risks, even more so when they were considering launching some sort of attack on him.

In the old days, she would not have given it a second thought, but Velouria's birth had changed all that. She had to admit to a feeling of anxiety whenever they were parted for too long. Not that she doubted Snarf's ability to look after her daughter, but the nagging suspicion always plagued her that Velouria would be better in her care. It was all part of the burden of parenthood, she knew, and sometimes she wished for the less complicated, if perhaps less fulfilling life, she had before she became a mother. It was not a question of resentment, more of loss, one that she happily accepted for all its doubts and worries. It was also one she despaired of Lion-O ever coming to terms with in its entirety.

She was sure he knew his responsibilities, but he had yet to shed that desire for recklessness that marked his early years on Third Earth. He was as likely now as in the past to hurl himself into a volcano if he thought it would solve the problem of the flaw in the Sword of Omens. This mission was yet another instance of his state of mind. For

someone who was weeks away from becoming a father to twins, effectively trying to beard Mumm-ra in his den smacked of foolhardiness in the extreme. Or maybe it was the next generation he was thinking of, looking at it as having faith that they now have the strength to pull this off in the hopes that the children in the Lair know at least some peace in their early years. Either way, Cheetara's new outlook on life had her torn more than ever between the two philosophies. She could almost hear Jaga's old, sage voice telling her 'anything worth doing won't be easy'. And he was right, as usual.

"If it gets Mumm-ra off our backs for a while, then it has to be worth it," Tygra said when she voiced her concerns.

"Is it? Or is it just..." She hesitated, biting back her word of choice. "Is it stupidity?" Her initial concerns were winning out.

"That isn't what you were going to say."

She sometimes wondered how he knew her so well and at times was glad he did. At other times, he could just be annoying.

"No, it was," she insisted.

Tygra smiled. "You think this is reckless, don't you?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I do. We have too much at stake to throw our lives away on a remote possibility, Tygra."

"It's not remote."

"You know what I mean. I don't like to say this, but I sometimes wonder if Lion-O will ever grow up."

His eyebrows raised a fraction. "You think Lion-O's immature?" He smiled. "Not that immature, Cheetara. He's come a long way since we first landed here, and part of the reason is because we've shown faith in him. He is also a married man."

"Barely."

"Actually, I thought Lion-O and Felina had been getting along a lot better lately."

"I suspect it's for appearances only."

Tygra considered. "No, I think it's genuine. Felina seems less distracted and much more settled lately."

She was prepared to take his word for that. The pair spent a good deal of time together in the pursuit of knowledge, a fact which had made her mildly jealous if only because it kept him from her side at night.

"She told you that?" she asked.

He shook his head. "No, we never discuss such things, although we do sometimes talk generally about her problems."

The merest nudge of envy made her flinch. "Problems?"

"She's concerned about the birth. She's adamant she wants the Warrior Maidens to assist with the delivery."

For her part, Cheetara could wholly understand Felina's wishes. Panthro might well talk of tradition and what he thought was best, but he was hardly qualified to advise on the intricacies of birth. As she knew all too well, things could and did go wrong. She was eternally grateful that Willa had been there the day of Velouria's birth to save both their lives.

"I think she's right," she said. "Only a mother knows what's best for her."

"I agree, but no one else does."

Cheetara sighed. "And so Felina will have to suffer because the majority must prevail."

She felt Tygra's gaze upon her and soon after followed the expected question. "Why do I get the impression that was not just about her birthing plans?"

"You're right. I can't help feeling that we failed them, Tygra. We all had such hopes for them, and it's failed, hasn't it? You must have noticed how things have changed between them."

He leant his head against her shoulder and nodded. "Yes. They're friends now, more than lovers."

"And we pushed them into it." She sighed again. "Don't you feel responsible? I do. Here we are, their elders, telling them we know what's best and tradition is a fine thing and now, with our pushing and shoving, their lives as husband and wife is a façade."

"There's nothing we can do about it now."

"Well, perhaps we should." She handed him Velouria and got up. "Perhaps now is the time to act before something bad happens."

"Like what?" he asked, shifting Velouria's weight into a more comfortable position in his arms. "I don't think a divorce would help."

When he finally looked over at her, she found she did not have an answer for him. It was hard to put what she felt into words. Just lately the strangest feeling had been nagging at her whenever she was with the pair, as though something about their present relationship boded ill for the future. It made no sense - she should be happy as anyone that they were at least getting along on some level - and she had tried to dismiss it as irrational, but still it persisted.

She scrubbed her hair away from her face and released a deep breath. "Oh, I don't know. Maybe I'm reading too much into it."

Tygra got up and joined her by the window. "Let's see how things are after Felina's had the twins. A baby changes everything, you know that."

She smiled and brushed a stray lock of hair from Velouria's cheek. The child cooed and waved a chubby fist in her direction. He was right, of course. She remembered long nights spent in discussion before Velouria's birth about how they would cope. It had brought them together, but it had been a strain, too. Perhaps that was what she was seeing between the pair.

"I know," she said. "Let's hope for their sake it is for the better."

"How could it be otherwise? A baby is always a blessing. Even," he said, tickling Velouria under the chin, "if they are extremely naughty, like you, my little one."

Velouria kicked her legs and a broad grin came to her face.

"She's happy," Cheetara said, though she knew what Tygra was referring to. Velouria had discovered the joys of self-mobility in the form of crawling and sometimes even cruising along upright with the aid of whatever furniture or fixtures were handy. And was she an ever-curious child. There was nothing she wouldn't get into and the speed with which Velouria could get herself in a precarious, potentially dangerous position put Cheetara's own super speed to shame. It was all normal behavior, and Tygra was only joking, but Cheetara knew in some ways it was more exhausting raising Velouria now than when she kept them up all night as a newborn.

"Of course, she is," Tygra said, "and so must you be." He leaned across and kissed her on the cheek. "Don't worry, I'm sure things will work out just fine."

Cheetara watched him take Velouria back to her crib and wished that she could share his confidence. The trouble was that nagging concern refused to go away.



"So, this Mefeset guy," Bengali was saying, "he's Mumm-ra, right?"

As trying situations went, Lion-O had to count this up amongst his top ten. With three of them crammed in the front seat of the Thundertank, things were cosy at best. With most of the Thundercats involved on this mission, they were already tight for space. The Thunderkittens had been only too glad to take a back seat and annoy their elders when Bengali had said he would suffer from travel sickness if he had to sit in the rear. They had done their best to accommodate him up front, but it was making for an uncomfortable journey.

"But if he's the same person, why did he change his name?" Bengali went on. A slight pause ensued while he popped a small brown spherical nut into his mouth from a bag he had with him and chewed it thoughtfully. "Doesn't make sense."

"What doesn't?" Lion-O said with a sigh.

"Why he changed his name. What's the point?"

"It's to indicate his change of persona," Panthro explained, "from withered corpse to..." He shrugged. "To a big headache for us."

"Yeah, I suppose so. And we're going to see Mumm-ra or Mefeset?"

"Hopefully, neither," came Cheetara's voice from the rear cabin.

Lion-O was aware of her objections, but was choosing to ignore them. He knew that what he was doing was right. If they were to have any peace and any life at all on Third Earth, a way had to be found to contain Mumm-ra's growing powers, if flat-out vanquishing him was impossible. He had hoped to have more currency from exploiting Mumm-ra's vulnerability of exposure to his own reflection, but the cunning old sorcerer had quickly learnt from that experience. With the loss of one avenue of defence, Lion-O had rapidly come to two conclusions. One was a concern about just how powerful Mumm-ra was, especially now that he'd somehow gained a powerful sword of his own, and the other was to wonder what his other weaknesses might be. If he could be reduced to a whimpering wreck just by the sight of his own reflection, Lion-O had had to wonder what else might adversely affect him.

The only thing he knew for certain about Mumm-ra was what he had learnt during the spell he spent back in time with Felina when they had discovered his natural and equally unnatural origins. They had witnessed the demise and transformation of Pharoah Mefeset into the sinister force for evil they knew all too well as Mumm-ra. From

those memories had come a faint glimmer of hope and one that this mission was about to confirm one way or another.

"So, let me get this straight," Bengali said. "We're not going to see him?"

"This isn't a social call," Lion-O said irritably. "If we do see him, he isn't going to be pleased to see us."

"So, why are we going?"

Feeling a detectable rise of annoyance within his chest, Lion-O chose not to answer that one. Everyone had been at the Council Meeting when he had explained the mission. He did not feel inclined to repeat himself, even for the new recruits who understandably had dealt little with the menace known as Mumm-Ra.

"It's like this," said Panthro, taking up the gauntlet. "Lion-O and Felina think that those big animal head statues Mumm-ra has in his pyramid are somehow connected to his powers. Destroy those and old Mumm-ra will be as weak as a kitten. At least, that's the theory. Right, Lion-O?"

He managed a grudging grunt. "We saw them grow from the canopic jars that held Mumm-ra's organs. They are quite literally a part of him."

"When you say his organs," Bengali said cautiously, "you don't mean like his..." He made a vague gesture in the area of his stomach. "His internal organs?"

"Yeah, all the mushy, stinky bits," said WilyKit enthusiastically, sticking her head up close to the open hatch that separated the front and rear compartments. "They pulled 'em out through his nose!"

"They did not," said her brother.

"They did. They used a hook to pull his brains out. Felina said so!"

"Wrong!" said WilyKat. "A brain is too large to get through your nose."

"They take it out in pieces, silly," she said with a sigh and a roll of her eyes.

"How ever they did it," said Panthro, "those organs ended up in those jars Lion-O saw and they became the statues we see today."

"No wonder he's got problems," Bengali said, as another nut went into his mouth. "He's been on his own too long. He's got no body."

The Thunderkittens caught the joke and they laughed uproariously. Squashed up against the sidewall of the Thundertank, however, Lion-O was in a less generous mood.

"This is a serious mission, Bengali, and I'd appreciate more professionalism from you."

"Sorry, just trying to lighten the mood."

"Well, don't. And stop eating. This is no time for food."

"Sorry," he said again, "I was hungry."

"Hungry? You've always got food in your hand."

"He's a growing boy," said Panthro with a grin.

"I was a growing boy too," Lion-O reminded him. "No one ever cut me any slack."

"We didn't have to. You were too well behaved."

"At least I never ate in the Thundertank."

What could have lapsed into an awkward silence was broken when Bengali proffered the bag under his nose. "You want one?" he asked.

The bag gaped open, a tempting array of bite-sized snacks showing within, and Lion-O had to fight the urge to give into temptation. Instead, he turned his mind to the other matter that had been bothering him.

"What are you going to do about the Sword of Omens?"

Bengali paused in his chewing and quickly swallowed the masticated contents of his mouth. "I'm working on it. A weapon like that, well, you have to approach it with respect. You can't just rush in and throw it on the fire and hope for the best."

That at least was a sentiment Lion-O could agree with. "How serious is it, this flaw?"

"It's minor."

"Could the blade break? It did once."

"Really?" Bengali's eyes were wide with curiosity. "Who re-forged it?"

Panthro broke into a hearty chuckle. "You wouldn't believe us if we told you. Let's just say he was someone we met in a volcano."

"Did you say 'in a volcano'?"

Panthro nodded.

"Sorry I asked. Whoever he was, he did a pretty good job."

"But it's not perfect," said Lion-O.

Bengali shrugged. "What is? Certainly, I think I can make a better job of it."

"Until then, it's still safe to use the Sword?"

"I don't see why not. According to you, the power derives from the Eye of Thundera. Viewed like that, the Sword of Omens is just an elaborate setting for the Eye."

His remark gave Lion-O pause for thought. As descriptions went, it was accurate. The Eye of Thundera he had seen given to his ancestor, Leonus the Wanderer, had been devoid of any trappings, being little more than a strange ruby gem to those to whom it had been given. If that second excursion into the past had taught him anything, it was that the histories of Thundera and Third Earth had long been intertwined. He still recalled his feelings of amazement when he had learnt that the Eye had been stolen from Mumm-ra's treasure room. He was left with many questions, first and foremost about how it got there. Certainly, his version of events had differed considerably with the written history Felina championed.

In fact, she had been quite annoyed when he corrected her telling of the tale of how the Eye of Thundera came to be given to Leonus. According to her precious books, it had been a divine gift from the gods, bestowed upon the worldly race of feline warriors in their quest for truth, honour, justice and loyalty. When he had described what had taken place during his excursion into the Book of Omens and found himself back at the dawn of their species, she had seemed genuinely surprised and had started to besiege him with the same questions he had pondered and had yet to come to any sort of satisfactory conclusion.

If he had expected her to provide him with the answers he sought, he was sorely mistaken. Challenging her over this omission in the written legends, she had gone on the defensive and hostilities had again resumed. They had not lasted long, however; Felina seemed weary of their battles and they had soon fallen back into the familiar pattern of easy toleration. They still shared a bed, out of necessity more than desire, but that was as far as it went. Giving up on any pretence of romance in their lives to his mind had been a positive step. The tension and stress of trying to maintain the facade had vanished and although there were certain aspects of their relationship that he missed, in particular the physical side of it, he had to admit that life was much easier now that they were friends rather than partners. He still annoyed her, as sometimes she did him, but how much simpler it was to forgive without the burden of fearing for the future of their marriage.

Now it was at an end, all sorts of freedoms had opened up to him. Felina still loomed large in his life, but free of the constant sniping and quarrelling, he found himself able to turn his attention to things that he had been neglecting. His relationship with the Sword

was one of them. Many hours spent with it had convinced him that a deeper knowledge of its intimate workings and powers was not something to be feared. Rather, it was something he longed to embrace. He could understand why Felina sought knowledge in her books. The yearning for a greater understanding of the Eye was something his soul craved with an intensity that he had once found frightening. He was certain that it would swallow him up - something of such magnitude could do nothing else - but what a price to pay for ultimate knowledge and access to unrivalled power.

If this was what Mumm-ra experienced every time the Ancient Spirits of Evil energised him with their powers, Lion-O could understand why he was willing to endure life in such an unnatural form. It was like a drug; the emptiness after it had gone always demanding greater satisfaction next time. Filled with such desire, it was easy to forget the dangers as Mumm-ra had. But the Eye of Thundera was different, Lion-O told himself. It was a force for good and if he lost his soul to it, at least he would not be entering into the kind of servitude to which Mumm-ra was enslaved. The power of the Eye of Thundera spoke of deep goodness, of a well being that made him strive to give his best, of power that he had barely tapped.

He had given the source of that power a great deal of thought over the long winter months, on the grounds that it better to know what he was getting into before finding himself in deep water. Chief amongst his concerns had been the question of why Mumm-ra had had it in the first place. He was certain of its intent to do good; that was without question. What then had the Ever-Living Servant of Evil wanted with it? In fact, why did he still crave its return? He had given into the doubts created by such considerations and for a time had created some distance between himself and the weapon. They lived in a fickle world. It was not too much a stretch of the imagination to believe that the Eye was capable of using him, perhaps as it had once had Mumm-ra, and of switching its allegiance when the time was right. Was that why it had been in his treasure room, the last resting place of a power source that was no longer content to work with its current partner?

Until those questions had been answered, he wasn't sure he would ever be able to use the Sword of Omens with confidence ever again. He had hoped Felina would have been able to settle his mind on the subject, but she had been unable to provide him with the reassurance he needed. Just when he had convinced himself he would never be truly able to trust the Eye again, Jaga had appeared to lay his fears to rest.

As usual, Jaga had been brief and succinct. The Eye was not a trinket to be claimed by whoever laid hands on it first, Jaga had declared. Mumm-ra may have had possession of it, but he could never rule it or use its powers because the Eye would not permit it. It had given its powers freely to Leonus for him and his descendants to use in the cause of good, not because it had to, but because it had chosen to. The Eye had chosen to bestow its gifts on Thundera as much as it had chosen to reject the rest of Mutant kind. That fact, however, would never stop either the Mutants or Mumm-ra from trying to retrieve the Eye they thought was theirs by right. Little did they know they were doomed to empty victories for a weapon that would never work for them.

For Lion-O, however, the notion that the Eye was capable of logical thought had come as no surprise. He was sure that he had always been able to detect an intellect when he was in harmony with its powers, as though whatever it was, whether a higher being or ineffable mass, worked through him, guiding his actions and opening his eyes to greater possibilities. Those things sometimes still frightened him, as he often yet thought of it as having his will overruled by this power. But even so, he now wondered if the Eye would ever reject him one day, and he glanced down at where it rested, inside the Sword of Omens at his side, and felt guilt - as if it was aware he doubted, feared, craved and depended upon its powers all at the same time.

However, since Jaga had allayed his biggest doubt, he was keen to embrace what the Eye offered. It had chosen them to wield its awesome powers and it was not a responsibility Lion-O took lightly any longer. The obvious path to this stronger bond seemed to lie with the Book of Omens. On several occasions, he had seen it work in conjunction with the Sword to reveal to him things that were pertinent to their situation. He had urged Felina to see if she could discover anything in her books that spoke of a way for the bearer of the Sword to use the book to increase this bond, especially in the light of Mumm-ra's growing powers and invulnerability.

Lately, however, she had seemed tired and had yet to give him anything solid to work on. Whenever he sought her out for answers, she was asleep or resting and he had to tell himself to bide his time. She was still a few weeks short of full term and he was sure that once the babies were born, she would be back to her old self. Certainly she was out of sorts, so much so that she had not put up a fight when he had announced she would be staying at the Lair with Snarf and Pumyra while the other Thundercats went on this mission. Her participation in this enterprise would have been a great help from a knowledgeable standpoint, but even she could see the wisdom in taking things easy this late in her pregnancy. They had both come too far to let things go wrong now.

Such thoughts were playing on his mind when he became vaguely aware that a question had been addressed to him and someone was waiting for an answer. Dragging himself back to the present moment, he found two sets of eyes upon him and Bengali's jaws still grinding furiously.

"The plan?" Panthro asked again. "When we get there?"

"We have to get in first," said Lion-O. "I expect Mumm-ra will put up a fight, so some of us will have to distract him while the rest of us destroy those statues."

"Excuse me for asking," said Bengali, "but why don't we go when he's asleep? That way we can take him by surprise."

"And how do we know when he's asleep?" Lion-O said. "Mumm-ra is active at all hours of the day and night."

"But he's a creature of the darkness, isn't he? You said so yourself."

Lion-O nodded. "And creatures of darkness are best tackled at night."

Bengali's expression spoke volumes about his indecision whether to say what was on his mind. In the end, his courage won out. "Doesn't that mean that's when he's at his most powerful? If so, why are we going at night?" He gestured to the dark sky with its moonlit clouds. "Wouldn't it be better to go during the day?"

"No," Lion-O said decisively. "I faced him at night during my Anointment Trials without the Sword and won. Day or night, it doesn't make any difference."

"At least the Mutants won't be there," came WilyKit's cheeky voice. "Slithe is too busy getting his beauty sleep right now."

"And he sure needs it," said her brother. "He sure is one ugly Mutant."

"Not all Mutants are ugly, WilyKat," came Lynx-O's calm voice, somewhere deep within the rear cabin. "Unless you think we are too?"

"Not like him," said the kitten, grimacing. "Anyway, we aren't Mutants."

"According to Lion-O, we were all called Mutants once," Lynx-O went on.

"Except some of us evolved beyond our bestial origins," said Panthro. "And some didn't."

Lion-O caught his implication. "Grune, you mean?"

Panthro grunted in reply.

"Have you ever considered," said Tygra, "that we might not be as far evolved as him?"

"Don't talk nonsense," said Panthro.

"I'm not. It's a reasonable question. After all, we do not share his tolerance for Thundranium. He seems to have a natural resistance to it that we lack, or perhaps have not developed."

The Thundertank hit a bumpy patch of debris at speed, throwing its passengers about. As an indicator of Panthro's mood, it was clear that he didn't like what he was hearing.

"Grune's a monster," he said. "He wants us all dead or his prisoners. So, before you go comparing us with him, you might want to remember that. As for this so-called resistance of his, I don't believe it. You want to know what I think?"

No one answered him, but he went on anyway.

"I think he's found some way of blocking its effects. I've always thought the throwbacks had something up their sleeves they weren't telling us. Grune just used it to screw us over, not help us. But if he can resist it, so can we."

"An intriguing prospect," said Tygra. "Perhaps next time we run into him we can ask him how he does it."

There was a level of sarcasm in his voice that Lion-O noticed did not escape Panthro. "You might laugh, my friend," he said. "But I'm telling you, he's got some kind of advantage over us that's got nothing to do with his genes."

"Is that possible?" said Lion-O, looking through the hatch to catch Tygra's eye.

He took a long, considered breath before answering. "Yes, I don't see why not. Third Earth has much to offer, as we have found. It is not beyond the realm of possibility that a substance exists that counters the effects of Thundranium. If we discover what that is, theoretically it should be possible to construct a device or even an elixir of some sort to give us a similar level of immunity."

"Look into it once this mission is complete. Grune is likely to be a thorn in our side for some time yet and we need to even out the odds."

"Talking of the mission," said Panthro, "Mumm-ra's pyramid dead ahead."

From out of the gloom, the massive edifice was rising above the sands. The lightning that usually played around the obelisks at each of its four corners was absent, suggesting that its undead occupant was dormant. Lion-O had to admit to a certain level of satisfaction at seeing this. Bengali's misgivings about the timing of the mission had thoroughly annoyed him, not least because having his judgement called into question never put him in a good mood. If Mumm-ra was inactive, however, it seemed that he had picked their time of attack well.

"How do we get in?" asked WilyKit with her face once more pressed to the opening. "It doesn't look like there's a door."

"Then we'll make one," said Panthro. "Brace yourselves, Thundercats. Let's go shake that old bag o'bones up till his teeth rattle!"

Never one for the subtle approach, and before Lion-O could protest, Panthro had the Thundertank running on full throttle as it roared up to the nearest wall of the pyramid. The front claws slammed into the stone and tore it to pieces. Seeing it coming, Lion-O had managed to grab himself something to hold onto and had to grit his teeth as Bengali's unsupported weight thudded into his side, making his healed leg from the ordeal months earlier in the tunnels ache in protest. A muttered apology was the best he could expect above the noise of rending stone as the Thundertank crunched through the last of its obstacles and stormed into the heart of Mumm-ra's tomb.

As entrances went, it was noisy enough to wake the dead and it had exactly that effect. If Mumm-ra had not been aware of their presence before, then he certainly knew about it now. As Lion-O exited the Thundertank, he heard the telltale creak of the heavy lid scraping the floor and the warning growl of the Sword of Omens. This might be their last chance to capitalise on the element of surprise, so he quickly gestured to the others to fan out around the pyramid. By the time Mumm-ra emerged, the only Thundercat in sight was Lion-O himself.

"Foolish cub," growled Mumm-ra, his eyes lighting with a fierce red glow, matched only by that of the Eye of Thundera. "You dare to come here?"

"I dare," said Lion-O.

"You think you can challenge me, here in my domain? Death will be the price for your arrogance."

"Fine words, Mumm-ra. But I will triumph here today."

Mumm-ra laughed. "What is today but a blink of the eye of time? Your days are numbered, Thundercat, but Mumm-ra lives forever!"



An hour after the Thundertank stormed out of Cat's Lair, Felina found that she was too tired to keep her eyes open another moment longer. The day had been more exhausting than usual, and she had sat through the Council Meeting with her eyes teetering on the very edge of closing. Lion-O's plan was a good one, although it had met with considerable opposition from Cheetara, who had argued that the risks did not outweigh the possible benefits.

Felina could understand her misgivings. There was no certainty that this mission would succeed, and they could return having achieved little other than severely upsetting Third Earth's resident demon. On the other hand, she could also sympathise with Lion-O. As the date of the birth grew nearer, she found herself growing more and more anxious. Panthro and his talk of plots did not help matters. As determined as she was to have Warrior Maidens assist in the delivery, he was equally adamant she should not. She had questioned him about how he could be so sure that this plot he talked of involved stealing her babies, when neither WilyKit nor WilyKat had mentioned that fact in their report of what they had overheard. Nor could he give her any satisfactory reason for laying suspicion at Arilla's door. As far as she was concerned, Arilla was a friendly face in trying times and Panthro's attempts to keep her away only made Felina more obstinate about wanting her presence.

Today, however, she was too tired to keep up the fight. She felt restless and the dull ache that had been plaguing her stomach for most of the day did not help matters. For a while she had been convinced that she was going into labour prematurely, only to tell herself that she was being silly and imagining things. It was too early for that, she reassured herself. This was just another thing she had to endure in a pregnancy that seemed to be dragging on forever. Soon, she told herself, soon it would all be over. There was just the birth to get out of the way first.

She had refused Snarf's offer of help in getting to her room and had sought sanctuary behind her closed door from his constant fussing. He meant well, but it was too overwhelming. How many times did she have to keep telling people she was fine? Just to prove it, she had even convinced Pumyra that it was safe to leave her when a Wollo female came calling, begging for help after a farming accident had left several members of the village desperately clinging onto life. The news that a true healer now lived at Cat's Lair had spread like wildfire and requests for assistance were growing by the day. Felina had sensed that Pumyra was torn between staying, as she had been ordered, and going to help. Since Lion-O was away, technically Felina had been left in command and had used her prerogative to insist that Pumyra go and do what she could for the stricken Wollo. Pumyra had clearly been grateful, as much as Felina was to have one less person fussing over her and with Snarf attending to his laundry, the Lair was blissfully quiet.

Left to her own devices, she could have done anything. She chose, however, to make the most of Lion-O's absence and relish the rare opportunity of having the whole bed to herself. Without him, she could have the pillows just the way she liked them, not stacked up neatly into small towers as he preferred. One was enough to support her head and she lay on her back, her hands resting lightly on her stomach, listening to the sound of silence.

Another reason it was great to be alone were the shockingly erotic dreams she'd been having lately. Laughable in reality given the state she was in, but her dream world knew of no such hindrances. When she'd wake from one such dream to look upon Lion-O lying beside her, Felina was sure he could read it on her face what she'd been dreaming and it was embarrassing to say the least, regardless if such things might be considered normal reactions to the crazy hormone fluctuations her body was enduring - or so she'd read.

Although, she didn't think that'd be a problem tonight, not with that persistent ache to contend with. At least the twins were quiet, sparing her any jarring kicks and turns, and she found herself wondering about their peacefulness. Perhaps they were trying to give her a hint, she decided, and followed their example. Sleep came to claim her and took her in its welcoming embrace, gently sweeping away the aches and stresses of the day.

Then, into her safe haven, came uproar. The smell came first, of wood smoke and the rancorous odour of burning flesh. At first, she thought she was having a nightmare, about the Emite village and that horrible fire. But when the smoke assaulted her nostrils,

bringing back consciousness with a voice that yelled at her to wake up, she knew this was no nightmare. Her eyes flew open and she found herself in a room filled with acrid black smoke that hung several feet above the bed. She breathed it in, and it swirled into her lungs, making her choke. In the distance, she heard again that voice, sounding so familiar, telling her she had to leave.

In the few minutes she had been asleep, clearly some disaster had befallen the Lair. Her first thought was for her babies, then for Snarf and Velouria, trapped somewhere in the burning building. Heaving herself from the bed, she called out his name, hearing only the crackling of flame-consumed materials in reply. She struggled to the door and looked out into a red-glowing corridor. Smoke hung heavily near the ceilings and wisps of grey were escaping beneath several of the doors. Putting her hands over her mouth, she made her way along the corridor, hugging the wall for support. Down in the hall of the Lair, there was still no sign of Snarf and between hacking coughs, she yelled out to him. Plumes of smoke were billowing from the twin corridors that led away from the main hall and she knew that if he were still there, then he must surely have been overcome.

As she hesitated, the voice sounded, urging her to leave and escape to safety while assuring her the others were all right. At her approach, the door to the outside world flew back and a warm wind touched her cheek. She was leaving one fire to head into another and yet she could not remain here. And still that voice told her to go.

"Go where?" she called back.

"Follow me, child," it said. "Have no fear."

With those words, she recognised it. "Father? Is that you?" Her heart raced with excitement, even though she logically knew he was long gone. Like a little girl, she tossed logic aside to indulge that old urge to be with her father and make him proud of her.

"Come with me, Felina," he replied. "Follow the sound of my voice. I will lead you to safety."

She did as she was told. He led her past the burning ruins of the Berbil village, past a mighty river that had evaporated under the extreme heat, past the twisted and blackened remains of the forest that had once been home to the unicorns. In a place she no longer recognised, he finally told her that she was safe and bade her rest in a small cave. Gratefully, she sank to the ground and rested her head against the wall. She was so tired. All she wanted to do was sleep. If she could shut her eyes for just a moment, she could vanquish these awful dreams for she was back to believing that's all the inferno could have been. Her father, he was gone. He did not speak to her like he did from beyond to Lion-O and she could not have walked through that charred and smoky countryside and made it without a mark on her, or choking to death on the fumes

for that matter. If she could just get some rest, close her eyes again; these unfamiliar surroundings would melt back into her bedroom.

It was the pain that jolted her awake. It ran through her like a knife raked through her guts. She clutched her stomach and cried out, bending over to protect herself and lessen the ache. A few seconds later it had passed and she sat back, gasping for breath. Was she to get no peace, she wondered. Even her sleep was invaded by nightmares of fires and visions of Third Earth aflame. Perhaps having Lion-O beside her was not a bad thing if he kept away the demons of the night.

Needing a drink, she reached for the glass she had left on the bedside table. Her searching fingers failed to locate it and came into contact with damp earth instead. Opening her eyes, shock turned to alarm as she realised she was no longer in her room, but in the cave she remembered from her dream, clad only in her night gown and a robe and boots she didn't even remember pausing to put on. Her footprints could be clearly seen in the moonlight, leading into the cave so she had come here under her own power. Had she sleepwalked? If she had put illusion into reality in her unconscious state, then no wonder the dream had seemed so real.

The experience had shaken her, but she quickly realised that there was nothing to be gained from remaining where she was. Snarf would be worried if he discovered her gone and a night spent in damp conditions had nothing to recommend it. Despite the growling discomfort from her stomach, she made it up to her feet, only to be knocked to the ground again by a racking pain that brought a cold sweat beading across her body. Long after the initial agony had passed, the nagging memory of it remained and she stayed where she was, on all fours, trying to work out exactly what was going on. The obvious conclusion sprang to mind. Was she going into labour? No, she told herself, she still had a few weeks to go. Whatever this pain was, it had nothing to do with the birth, and it was all the more reason to prompt her to return home where she could get some help.

She held onto that belief until the next jolt robbed her of her breath and kept her down on her knees. Worse yet, this bout brought a gush of warm liquid forth, soaking the bottom portion of her gown. The frightening truth of it could not be denied. She was far from home, she was alone, and her babies were coming, sooner rather than later. She had never been more scared in all her life.

At this moment, she wished Lion-O were with her or anybody, really, who would be the least bit sympathetic so she wouldn't have to endure this alone. She found herself hoping that this was not real, that her last nightmare segued into this horrible scenario. This was not, of all things, how she imagined giving birth would be. But the pain - it was too real to deny. This was happening here and now.

Between debilitating cramps, she squinted out of the cave and determined she was far beyond the Lair and far beyond any other friendly peoples, including the Warrior Maidens. Nothing about the silhouette of the landscape looked familiar. She thought

about crying out, but then stopped short. She was in no position to attract the wrong kind of company - it was bad enough considering the possibility that someone with ill intent may find her before the others would. For now, she was safer hidden here given her odds of making it back to the Lair in her present state was minimal and only given to grow worse with time.

Another stabbing pain hit her abdomen and she almost had the will to be quiet snatched from her, but managed to bite her lip to quell the tail-tell cry that threatened to accompany the pain.

Felina's mind raced, flipping back through all the things she'd read in anticipation for this moment, as well as recalling all the advice she'd heard from the likes of Cheetara, Willa, and Arilla. All the books and first-hand accounts she could fill her head with in a lifetime, she thought, could not prepare her adequately for this moment. There was no preparing for this pain, this fear that now consumed her. She also couldn't help but be reminded of what might go wrong and finding herself in these surroundings and with labor coming on faster than she'd ever thought it was supposed to did nothing to calm her.

She tried to make her way over to and sit down on a ledge of stone but found walking actually helped her stay more comfortable once she got upright. Grunting through another round of crippling cramping, Felina braced herself on the damp wall of the cave. She tried to will herself to some semblance of calm by concentrating on her breaths. Maybe someone would find her before the babies actually came. Maybe the sword of omens was alerting Lion-O to her troubles this very minute. That hope was the only thing she could cling to as she tried to cope.



With hindsight, Lion-O could see that he had probably made a mistake in allowing Mumm-ra to take on his energised form. His role as distraction had been complicated to the point where he was running out of places to hide, while the others clustered around the base of one of the statues discussing the best way to bring it down. To Lion-O's mind, the solution was obvious, and he had lost patience waiting.

"Move!" he ordered.

"No!" yelled Tygra. "It won't work."

But Lion-O was in no mood to listen. The Eye of Thundera opened at his command and a beam of energy flew towards the base of the statue. Seconds before it hit, a red glow irradiated the statue and the power of the Sword of Omens was dissipated across its

surface. A hearty laugh broke the stillness that followed and Lion-O had to run for his life as Mumm-ra threw an energy bolt in his direction.

Coming to rest behind another of the statues, he found Tygra beside him. "How did you know?" he panted.

"Lucky guess."

"Don't believe you."

"All right then, I tested out this device on it." He showed Lion-O the small square gadget he held in his hand. "It's a matter disrupter. It should have shattered the stone, but that red glow burnt it out before it had a chance to work."

"But the Sword is more powerful than that."

"Yes, but it works on the same principle. It tried to penetrate the statue's defences by force and it was repelled."

His next question was snatched from his lips as the ground beneath them lifted several feet into the air and plunged back down. By the time he had hit solid ground, the statue seemed to have grown several feet. Either that or they had just fallen into a very large hole.

Right on cue, Mumm-ra appeared above them, congratulating himself at such an easy victory. "I told you I would win, Lion-O," he said, his left hand glowing with the unearthly power of his evil masters. "Now you will die!"

He had lost the Sword of Omens in the fall and now it lay beyond his reach. With Mumm-ra poised to strike, time was not on his side. Even if he called it to his hand, it would come too late to deflect the lethal blow. Stalemate ensued, with Mumm-ra daring Lion-O to see if he could move quicker than he could deliver his energy bolt. Malice burned in his soulless eyes as his grin broadened, knowing he had triumphed in this battle. His fingers twitched and Lion-O held his breath.

But then Mumm-ra was being hurled across the opening, pushed violently by a fierce pulse of blue energy. His hesitation had cost him dearly and the other Thundercats had regrouped and taken him by surprise. Now Cheetara stared down at him, a look of muted satisfaction on her face.

"Didn't I tell you this was dangerous?" she said.

"If we get through this in one piece," Lion-O said as he hauled himself up, "remind me never to doubt you again."

Glancing round, he saw Mumm-ra's crumpled shape up against the cauldron. It would not be long before he recovered and renewed his attack. If they were ever going to end his reign of terror, then now had to be the time.

"You say we can't penetrate it," he said to Tygra, "but what about if we use physical force against it?"

"That would be harder for its defences to counter," he replied. "Although I'm not sure that even Panthro would be able to shift one of those statues."

Lion-O grinned. "He doesn't have to. Panthro, get the Thundertank's grappling hooks on this statue. Bring it down!" Lion-O had to admit that now it had been fortuitous to barge into the Pyramid with the Tank.

Panthro raced to the vehicle and activated the hooks. The chains sprang out, fixed clawed spikes into one of the pillars. Then he hit reverse. The Thundertank's engines screamed in protest as it tried to gain traction. For an agonisingly long time, the Thundertank bounced up and down on the spot, roaring furiously, when suddenly to Lion-O's ears came the sound of pebbles falling. Up above the statue was crumbling as inch by inch it was pulled from its base.

"Everyone, clear!" he yelled. "It's coming down."

The Thundertank's treads bit into the ground and with a mighty heave it pulled the bottom section out of the pillar. With its base gone, the statue tumbled down. The animal head hit the ground last of all and shattered into a thousand pieces. In its final collapse came the sound of a tortuous wail and through the dust Lion-O looked over at Mumm-ra, to see him on his knees, reduced to a pathetic pile of dry skin, bones and rags, his eyes wide and his mouth agape.

"What have you done?" he said, crawling over to the place where the statue had once stood. From the ruins, he picked up a shrivelled lump of something that looked like it had once been vaguely human.

"Is that what I think it is?" Lion-O heard WilyKat whisper. "Is that one of his organs?"

"It is, isn't it, Mumm-ra? They were the last remnants of your worldly life, the very things that bound you to Third Earth. Now they are destroyed, your power is at an end."

When Mumm-ra looked up, Lion-O could have sworn he saw tears in his eyes and a strange emotion came over the Thundercat. Pity, he actually felt pity for the unworldly monster that, had the tables been turned, would have had no issues with snuffing him out and never looking back. Lion-O supposed, this was the fundamental difference between their mindsets.

"Curse you, Thundercats," he said. "Curse you for this! You came to my world and destroyed everything I had. One day, Lion-O, you will know what it is to taste defeat and stand helpless while your enemies gloat. You may think this is the end, but I will have my revenge yet!"

"You can try," said Lion-O. "We'll be ready for you." He gestured to the others. "Let's go. Our work here is done." Mumm-Ra wasn't ultimately destroyed, but it would be a long, long while before he had the strength to give them a run for their money. Lion-O could leave satisfied.

Away from the dusty interior, the air of the outside world seemed fresher and spoke of the approaching dawn. Panthro brought the Thundertank to a halt and turned to look back at the pyramid.

"That'll keep him busy for a while," he grunted.

"He'll be back," said Lion-O.

"And coming after us," said Cheetara.

"Are you still worried?" said WilyKit. "It worked, didn't it?"

Cheetara shivered. "He cursed us. Doesn't that worry you?"

"Not particularly," said Lion-O. "There's nothing he can do about it."

"Let's hope not," she said. "I've got this bad feeling that we haven't heard the last of this."



Felina's brow was soaked with sweat as the rays of dawn filled the sky, and her cheeks were damp with tears. The night's labor had been brutal and relentless, and it was now reaching its peak. The pains, they were almost constant with little time to catch her breath between onslaughts. She was in absolute agony, the likes of which she'd never experienced before.

She'd taken her robe off some time ago but used its sleeve to bite onto when the pains would peak, yet afraid to make too much noise. Still, it wasn't easy and sometimes she couldn't help herself.

Between ragged breaths, she sobbed. How she wished this would all just stop, and she could allow her exhausted body rest it begged for and her mind a shelter from the pain. But there was no mercy, and she simply found herself wishing it would end soon.

Then suddenly, during the apex of the latest wave of merciless cramping, something changed. Instinctively she crouched and knew that the baby was finally making its debut. She was able to reach and support the newborn, even through this most devastating part, which brought her to her knees, and stared with stunned disbelief at the tiny, wet cub she held when it was over. Blinking, she snapped out of it long enough to reach into her boot for her dagger and used it first to cut part of the inner tie out of her robe. Then she used it again to cut the child's cord. Next, she employed the string to quickly tie off the cord, having remembered that much from her texts. Disturbed that the cub had yet to exercise its lungs as she thought it should, she wiped at its nose and mouth until it wailed plaintively. Felina felt somewhere between a laugh and a tear as she cradled the child, happy that it had been born seemingly healthy.

Her joy was cut short by another round of the same ardent pain.

"No more," she whimpered before she suddenly realized this wasn't over - there were twins, or so they'd told her, and it looked like they were right. She hadn't entirely forgotten, but she'd also wanted so badly for the ordeal to be over with, perhaps she held on to the hope that they'd been wrong.

As best she could, she swaddled her first born inside her robe before concentrating on bringing the second cub into the world. In one bright spot to the evening, the process was shorter the second time around and so she had to endure much less pain. Felina repeated the same procedure following the second child's delivery, sighing wearily.

With the task done and the cubs safely swaddled in the warmth of her robe, Felina lay down beside them. She was exhausted, too tired to try to move with them now. She needed rest. As her heavy lids closed, she almost thought she saw a large shadow fall across the wall of the cave.



Upon returning to the Lair that morning, Lion-O soon realized their troubles had just begun as soon as he was met by a twittering Snarf and a sheepish Pumyra. Felina, they were hesitant to admit, was missing. Tygra's sensible remark about the Sword failing to signal any sort of peril barely registered over the crushing thoughts of Mutants or other shadowy figures that may have snatched her in the night, intent on Jaga-knew-what. Snarf swore that the Lair alarms never sounded and that he'd only taken his eye off the monitors once in the middle of the night, when he'd gone to check on Velouria. He was

finishing up the laundry when she ambled off to bed, and that was the last Snarf had seen of her. It was a disturbing mystery and one Lion-O thought he could get to the bottom of soon enough.

The sword or the Lair security may not have sent out a warning, but what Lion-O saw through the apertures in the hilt of the sword when he called on second sight gave him little comfort. He lowered the blade slowly and looked levelly at each of his waiting, eager friends.

"She's...she's in a cave, somewhere beyond the River of Despair," he finally said.

Picking up on his tone, Panthro prodded him to get to the larger point instead of asking perhaps the more obvious question - how she got there. "Is she okay?"

Lion-O blinked. "I-I don't know. I saw her lying on her side and there was some blood..."

Snarf cringed, and Cheetara let a small gasp escape her. Panthro led the charge back to the Thunder Tank.

"No time to lose - let's go," he prompted them along the way. The Thundercats, including little Velouria, piled into the Thunder Tank. None of it happened fast enough for Lion-O's liking, even after they got going. At least Bengali crowding him was the smallest of worries, now.

"Come on," he urged from his perch in the passenger seat, "can't this thing go any faster?"

Panthro shook his head. "Technically, but for this terrain, this is it. I go any faster and we might lose control. Take it easy Lion-O." His words were meant to reassure, but Lion-O caught the tension in his tone.

Cheetara, he heard from the rear compartment, lamented not knowing Felina's exact location or she'd volunteer to run out ahead of them. There was nothing they could do but endure the tense ride, which seemed to take twice as long as it ordinarily would and suffer the horrible scenarios their minds would conjure. Lion-O was sure nothing going through their minds could top what was going through his. He hoped to the fates he was wrong.

Finally, they reached an area that looked close to Lion-O's description, which he'd been describing in more detail to Panthro as they drove. The countryside was alive with the sounds of spring time but nobody came rushing out of the cave to greet them at the sound of the ThunderTank's roaring engines - neither friend nor foe. Lion-O could feel his blood pounding in his ears as he ran toward the cave's opening, part of him anxious to get there and part of him dreading what he may see when he did.

Stepping inside, he stopped to let his eyes adjust to the light difference. Then he saw her, just as she had been in the sword's vision, laying on the rocky cave floor with her back to him, and eerily still. He tried to call out her name, but his breath caught in his throat.

He forced himself to close the distance, cautiously kneeling by her side when he reached her. Felina's eyes were shut and her hair was matted to her head as if she'd been soaking wet earlier. Gingerly, he laid a hand on her upper arm and nearly jumped out of his fur when she moved. Her eyes opened and she turned to look up at him. He felt a wave of relief run over him, relaxing muscles he hadn't realized were tensed.

"Are you alright?"

A weak smile came to her lips. "I am now," she said in a hoarse whisper.

It was then that, amid what he'd thought was a pile of fabric near to her, came some movement and a tiny cry. For the second time, his breath caught in his throat. He was only vaguely aware of the other Thundercats' presence around him as he went to the bundle and carefully picked it up. Two tiny cubs, their eyes seemingly froze in a permanent squint and both taking turns bellowing out fervent cries that lacked any real volume, were bundled in the garment. They felt light, even with there being two of them - can't have weighed more than ten pounds together, he supposed. One of them had a thick mass of hair that stuck out wildly in all directions.

Lion-O looked to Felina then back to the cubs, unbelieving that this moment had arrived. Her middle was still protruding noticeably, but not like it used to, he realized. He was awestruck, looking back down into their tiny faces.

Panthro broke the collective silence. "I know that look," he said with a mirthful chuckle. "A little early but, congratulations."

One twin broke a meaty fist free of its swaddling and waved it in the air. Lion-O let the cub grab onto his finger, surprised at the strength of the babe's grip. The contact seemed to soothe the cub, who had up until that point been highly agitated.

It was Tygra who took charge. "Let's get them back to the Lair. Being premature, although not by much, they'll need to be examined carefully. Felina as well."

Pumyra nodded her agreement.

"They sound healthy to me," Panthro declared.

For Felina's part, she started to make the effort to get to her feet, but Panthro spared her the trouble by picking her up carefully and carrying her back to the Tank. Too tired to protest, she laid her head warily on his shoulder as acceptance of his assistance.

Lion-O followed, with the babies huddled close to him. Cheetara had waited back at the Tank with Velouria. The toddler visibly brightened when she noticed what Lion-O carried as he took a seat in the rear for the ride home. She motioned to her mother a sign that usually indicated herself and as such, meant 'baby'.

Cheetara nodded, smiling broadly at her daughter. "Yes," she agreed. "There're two babies!"

Velouria squealed with delight, impressed that there were in fact other creatures her size in the world besides Snarf.

Panthro let Pumyra take over regarding Felina's care after getting her into the Tank, to take his place up front while Bengali happily took over the front passenger seat for himself. Pumyra offered Felina a blanket to wrap herself in and eased her as carefully as possible into the nearest seat. It was obvious that Felina was in some discomfort and seemed more tired than if she'd climbed out of a Thundrainium pit, but from all appearances, had otherwise faired the birthing ordeal well. The bumpy ride home would probably not do much to improve her condition, but then again, it would probably pale in comparison to what she'd just been through. She seemed willing, at least, to keep any complaints to herself as they started to roll out for home even if her occasional wincing gave her away.

The unexpected good news brought Snarf out of hiding, and he navigated the crowded back cabin to hop up beside Lion-O and get a good look at his new charges.

"What do you think?" Lion-O asked, though his gaze never left the little ones he held.

Snarf looked thoughtful before declaring, "I think that one has hair like you had. They certainly don't look identical." He paused, looking to Lion-O expectantly. "I'd refer to them by their names but you haven't told us what they are."

Lion-O blinked. He and Felina had idly batted a few ideas around but nothing really struck them or stuck. Furthermore, he didn't know yet what he was dealing with - a set of boys, a set of girls, or one of each. He supposed the group was eager to find out and now that Snarf had brought it up in a round about way, he was curious himself. Gingerly, he balanced them on his lap and carefully peeled back the layers of robe that served as their receiving blanket. Almost immediately, an arc of liquid caught him by surprise.

Snarf simply chuckled. "Well, that one's a boy."

As for the twin with the head of hair, that was a girl. So it was - a son and a daughter. The relative chill of being uncovered agitated the babies, so Lion-O quickly wrapped them back up.

"We've a boy and a girl." Lion-O wore a grin he couldn't shake if he tried as he made the announcement, and it only widened when he caught Felina's eye. Her enthusiasm was muted by her exhaustion, but he could tell she was just as pleased. This, they had done well.

"Cool, just like us," WilyKat chimed in.

"You mean, double trouble?" Snarf challenged. "Not with me around - they'll think twice about sparking any mischief."

"One thing I don't understand is what you were doing out here, Felina. How did you get here?" Tygra asked.

She gave a weak shrug. "Sounds crazy, but I'm not sure myself. I had a dream that seemed so real - about the Lair, it was on fire and so was the countryside - and my father was calling to me, urging me to follow him to where it was safe. When I came to my senses, I was in that cave with the labor too far progressed to walk back. I guess I was sleepwalking."

"Odd," Tygra muttered, stroking his chin thoughtfully. "And you were alone the whole time?"

Felina nodded, shuddering a little perhaps at the memory of it. The small bit of conversation seemed to wear her out, and she was content to try to nod off for the remainder of the journey - whenever the ruts and bumps the Tank sped over weren't disturbing her.

Cheetara elbowed her mate in the side enough to get his attention. "Oh, who cares about tradition," she said, her voice lowered. "They're safe and now we don't have to worry about the Warrior Maiden issue."

"I've got another question," Kit piped up. "If we're all here, who's minding the Lair?"

Tygra and Cheetara exchanged glances before laughter broke out in the crowded rear compartment of the Tank.

"I guess in all the excitement, that was overlooked," Tygra conceded. "At least we know Mumm-Ra won't be able to take advantage of the situation."

Cheetara smiled. "And I don't know a Mutant in the bunch that's up and about before noon."

For his part, Lion-O hardly noticed the conversation. He held new life, life he had helped create, and he marveled at them. They were clean slates, the stories of their lives waiting to unfold. Thinking about it sent all variations of emotions through him - everything from the apex of pure joy to dread and uncertainty. Right now, the cubs were

at their most pure. No mistakes had been made, no sorrows suffered, no regrets to keep them awake at night. Everything was new to them and wondrous, and it would be his task from here on out to help guide them through it all - the joys, the wonders, the sorrows - and he hoped he was ready. Lion-O wasn't sure how he could feel excited and terrified at the same time but it was the best he could describe it if he must.

Snarf clapped him on the shoulder, bringing Lion-O out of his thoughts. "Welcome to fatherhood."

Lion-O smiled, his emotion beyond mere words. Little did he know it, but he was in agreement with Slithe on one point. The winds of change were blowing, and life would never be the same.

Ten pounds and a head of hair

Came into without a care

What they thought were cries

Were little laughs

Only looking forward and moving fast

The little bundle had arrived

And I was happy to be alive

In a magic world

Long days and dreaming nights

Wide eyes take in all the sights

A little wonder goes a long, long way

Learning where to go and what to say

Say hello to your new son

Well he sure is having fun

In a magic world

Every moment's built to last

When you're living without a past

In a magic world

--From Whence I Came/In A Magic World, The Eels