

Reign of Blows

By Purrsia Kat

Lord Lion-O brooded about inside the Lair. He had been in a terribly sour mood lately, causing his ThunderCat brethren to sidestep him whenever possible. It bothered Lion-O that the Mutants and Mumm-Ra were still unheard from. Perhaps all the down time disturbed the warrior he was at heart.

He impatiently paced the hall in front of the Council Chamber, where the others were due to arrive any moment. The lion had an urgent issue he needed to discuss with all the ThunderCats. Finally, Cheetara, Panthro and Tygra arrived and he followed them to the Council Table. Upon taking their seats, Lion-O noticed the absence of his wife and the Thunderkittens. He hoped they were just going to be a little late. But as the silent minutes passed by, he felt his annoyance with them grow. Cheetara and Tygra shared a worried glance when Lion-O stood and exited the chamber without a word.

Lion-O walked briskly down the corridor, searching for the missing cats. Upon passing an open window, he heard the Thunderkittens' laughter coming from down in the courtyard. A harsh lecture was taking form in his mind as he stormed out the front doors. Once outside, he was aghast to see Felina engaged with the Thunderkittens in a childish water balloon fight. He was more than a little worried that the lioness was still not keeping up with her studies like she had in the past. It seemed she was regressing farther into irresponsible cubhood.

Not a single member of the frolicking group noticed Lion-O's approach, apparently too wrapped up in whipping or dodging the bulging balloons. Felina released a particularly hefty missile intended for WilyKat, who nimbly ducked out of harm's way. Unfortunately, Lion-O had no time to avoid the errant projectile. WilyKit gasped when the balloon exploded on impact, soaking the lion from head to toe.

Felina saw that Lion-O was clearly more angry than amused. Lion-O looked on in disbelief as the lioness turned on her heel and ran for the draw bridge. Though he suspected she ran to spare herself the embarrassment of getting lectured in front of the kittens, he was in no mood for games. WilyKit and WilyKat stared in amazement, as Lion-O sprinted after the fleeing scholar.

He caught up with her in the grassy meadow in front of the Lair. In one fluid motion he wrapped an arm around her waist, lifting her off the ground. Lion-O turned her around to face him, unyielding as he held her in his steely grip.

"Just what is all this nonsense you've been up to?" demanded Lion-O.

Felina struggled to free herself from his grasp to no avail. "My lord, put me down!"

Though they had been wed for nearly 2 weeks, she still addressed him formally, which only accentuated the emotional distance that still existed between them.

"I'll let you go," Lion-O said with narrowed eyes, "If you say my name."

Felina looked taken aback, but her expression quickly softened. "Let me whisper it in your ear," she purred. She nestled her face into his thick red mane until she reached the flesh of his ear. Lion-O felt a tingle spread from his neck down through his body as her warm breath caressed his ear. Instead of whispering his name like he anticipated, she bit down on his earlobe instead. It wasn't a particularly hard bite, but the shock of it was enough to cause him to loosen

his hold on her. She seized the opportunity to run for the forest, hoping she could lose him in the dense woods.

When she reached the tree line, Felina looked back and saw Lion-O was close in pursuit. She quickly darted off the main trail. She zig-zagged around robust trees, yet was still unable to get far ahead of the strong lion. Before she had time to comprehend what happened, Felina tumbled down a steep incline. She came to rest with a splash in a soggy field of mud. Lion-O joined her seconds later, sloshing more mud onto the lioness as he came to rest beside her. Felina and Lion-O sat in silence, each trying to catch their breath. When Felina attempted to wipe some of the mud off her face, she only succeeded in smearing it more. This caused her to burst into uncontrollable giggles.

Lion-O maintained his scowl for a few moments more, until her constant giggling finally relaxed his mood. His face broke into a lopsided grin. He picked up a handful of mud and slung it at Felina. The volley hit her squarely in the chest, the majority of the gritty mud sliding inside her tunic. Though still laughing, Felina winced at the cold mud slithering down her body.

"I suppose I deserved that," she managed to choke out between giggles. "By the fates, we're a mess!"

For the first time in days, Lion-O felt the darkness that had clouded his mind begin to lift like the morning fog. Her infectious laughter soon sent his spirits rising. He rose to standing, extending his hand to assist the giddy lioness.

They sloshed out of the bog and returned to the Lair, dripping with mud from head to toe. Upon their return, they found the Thunderkittens and Snarf waiting in the courtyard.

"Look at you!" Snarf wailed, his paws pressed to his head. "What in Jaga's name got into you two? You're...you're a mess!"

The guilty pair simply looked at each other and smiled, fearing another fit of laughter was imminent. The Thunderkittens were relieved to see the young couple return in such high spirits.

"Gosh, Lion-O," WilyKat finally managed. "The way you went tearing off after Felina, we thought....uh, we thought--"

"We just thought you were really angry, and might, uh, I don't know..." WilyKit floundered when she tried to finish her brother's sentence.

"Well, I wasn't pleased with you guys, but even angry I wouldn't hurt any of you," Lion-O assured the twins. "I suppose in all the fun you were having, you forgot about the council meeting I called."

The offending trio displayed simultaneous expressions of shock, followed by sheepishness.

Lion-O continued his admonishments. "Fun and games have their place, but your duties as ThunderCats are important. We need to get serious here. Now let's go to council. The others are already there, waiting."

Snarf interrupted in a half-crazed squeal. "You're not tracking that filth into the Lair! I spent all day scrubbing it!"

"Snarf, what do you expect us to do?" Lion-O asked. "We have to go into the Lair to wash."

WilyKit and WilyKat exchanged a devious glance. "I have an idea you'll like, Snarf," announced WilyKat, edging toward one of the barrels that still held ripe water balloons. The twins fired off a quick succession of balloons, pelting the elder pair of cats.

"Let me get out of the line of fire first," Snarf complained while shaking off the soaking he endured from the first round of volleys.

Felina was bent over in another fit of wanton laughter, each balloon that struck inspiring her

to giggle harder. As the caked-on mud began to flow off his body with the cleansing water, Lion-O couldn't help but join her in laughter.



Deep inside the Black Pyramid, Mumm-Ra watched the jubilant scene via his magical cauldron with disgust.

"Laugh while you can ThunderCats," he sneered. "Soon it will be I who feels pleasure as you beg at my feet for your miserable lives...."



Cheetara awoke as the first rays of the sunrise made their way over the horizon. Already, she was steeling herself for what the day's mission would hold. The cool morning air chilled her naked body when she rose from bed. The cheetah glanced at the still mass that was Tygra's sleeping form. His visit to her bedchamber the prior evening was a welcome event. The gentle tiger's tender lovemaking was just what she had needed to ease her mind and allow her to rest peacefully.

The disturbance Cheetara created while dressing brought Tygra out of his slumber. He let out a muted growl as he stretched his muscular arms above his head.

"I see you're anxious to go this morning, fast one," Tygra sleepily noted.

Cheetara flashed him a knowing smile. "You know a good spy mission always gets my attention."

The tiger nodded. "You are one of the best spies Thundera had ever seen." He crossed the room and took the slender she-cat into his arms. "Still, I don't like the idea of you going to Castle Plundarr alone."

Having Tygra's still-nude body wrapped around her almost made her consider returning to bed. Pushing her lustful thoughts aside, she replied, "Actually, with just me on the mission, I'm less likely to be detected than if we go in a group."

Tygra knew she was right. He also knew he would have an edgy day at the Lair waiting for her return. He ran his fingers through her spotted tresses and kissed her softly. "The Eye protect you," he whispered.

She allowed herself to linger in his warm embrace a moment longer. "Dress yourself now. It won't be long before we must meet with the others."

Tygra quickly donned his ThunderCat uniform, and the pair stepped out into the hallway. Cheetara watched Felina and Lion-O exit their separate bedchambers with curiosity.

"You know," Cheetara remarked with some concern, "I don't think those two have shared a room since they wed. Leads me to think they have yet to consummate the marriage."

Tygra pondered his love's comments. "You're probably right. But I don't think it's cause for concern just yet. Remember, they aren't the conventional married couple. It will take time."

"Ready for the performance of your life, Cheetara?" asked Panthro as he sauntered up behind the couple.

Cheetara chuckled. "Those scurvy Mutants don't scare me, Panthro. I'm more worried about whether I can glean any useful information from the Castle as to what those bastards have been up to lately. Because you know they must be up to something."

Panthro nodded. "Seems they have nothing better to do but cause trouble."

"Well, let's get to the control room so we can go over the day's plan one more time. Hopefully, Lion-O has worked out some of the details in his plan since yesterday's council meeting," Tygra added.



The rest of the ThunderCats were already waiting in the control room when Panthro, Cheetara, and Tygra arrived. Lion-O quickly called the meeting to order.

"As we discussed yesterday," he began, "the Mutants and Mumm-Ra have been dormant too long. And, so, we agreed to send Cheetara on an intelligence mission. We also talked about the missing Key of Thundera and where to find it..."

It was a source of embarrassment for Felina to have admitted she lost the Key of Thundera, which is the critical piece needed when one entered the Book of Omens. Apparently, Lion-O had been thinking about the Key ever since he'd been trapped inside the Book and aimed to recover it. And because of her carelessness on the journey to Third Earth, the Key was somewhere in the scattered wreckage of the ship she arrived on.

"...so while Cheetara is on her mission, Felina, Panthro and I will split up and search the north end of the jungle near the crash site," continued the Lion-O. "WilyKit and WilyKat--"

WilyKit elbowed her sleepy brother. "--the two of you will search the south end of the jungle."

"It's too bad the Sword of Omens couldn't help you locate that Key, Lion-O," Tygra interjected. "Searching for it this way is going to be a tedious job indeed."

"Knowing the Key is behind some force that's blocking the Sword is an important clue," Panthro added. "Perhaps it landed near a magnetic field of some kind."

Felina clutched the Book of Omens to her chest. "One good thing is, when either the Book or the Sword is near the Key, they'll react to let us know we're close."

"In other words," Panthro said with a laugh, "They'll tell you which haystack the needle is in."

Lion-O distributed thick leather wrist bands to the group. "These are communicators Panthro kindly came up with. This way, we can keep in contact with each other and stay in touch with Tygra here at the Lair."

The strong scent of bacon floated into the room, evidence of Snarf's breakfast efforts. The appetite arousing aroma was enough to finally snap WilyKat out of his half-dazed state.

"I don't know about you guys," the kitten exclaimed, his stomach suddenly growling, "but I say the first order of business is we eat!"

Mumm-Ra's wrinkled forehead furrowed as he listened to the ThunderCats' plans through his magical cauldron. "As if it wasn't bad enough that that she-cat and her cursed Book survived the inferno, but now they seek the Key of Thundera?"

"Yes, Mumm-Ra," confirmed the Ancient Spirits of Evil. "With that Key, not only will they be able to unlock the mysteries of their own past but they can also discover your ancient history as well. The Guardian of the Book holds vast knowledge about the entire universe since its inception, and he will reveal to the keyholder anything they wish to know."

"Then I must intercept them and find the Key first. And when I do, I will go inside the Book and discover the weaknesses of the ThunderCats -- allowing me to defeat them once and for all." He chuckled at the cleverness of his own plan. "But first, I must contact those wretched Mutants and see if I can't persuade them to step up their planned reign of terrorism, thereby distracting the ThunderCats while I search for the Key..."

With silent stealth, Cheetara scaled the wall of Castle Plundarr. Her hands slid quickly up the vine, instinctively knowing there wasn't much time to get to the next level before the guards finished their shift change. She vaulted onto a balcony mid-way up the Castle. Her lightning speed allowed her to escape into the morning shadows just before the next Mutant guard on duty entered the balcony. Once the reptilian guard turned his back to her, the cheetah sprinted through the open door and into the dank castle. Concentrating her sixth sense powers, Cheetara quickly honed-in on where she needed to go. Her feline instincts lead her to the Mutants' council chambers. Monkian, Slithe, Jackalman, and Vultureman were already in the midst of a heated discussion. Cheetara took advantage of their distracted state and slipped into the room unnoticed. She crouched behind a pile of crates near the entrance and listened.

"Just how long do you need to build that bomb, Vultureman?" demanded the reptilian leader of the Mutants, Slithe.

Vultureman cawed indignantly. "You can't rush perfection, Slithe."

"I say, we start terrorizing the people of the countryside now without Vultureman's bomb, hoo HOO," Monkian chimed in, a blood thirsty glint in his animal eyes. "You know, kind of break them in before we blow them to dust."

"You s-s-simian simpleton," Slithe hissed. "We don't want to blow up the meek creatures of Third Earth. We'll need them as slaves when we rule this pathetic planet. The bomb is for those damned ThunderCats."

Jackalman cackled. "Yes, I say stick to the original plan. Finish the bomb first. That way, Vultureman can drop it right on top of Cat's Lair in his Flying Machine. With those meddlers vaporized, then we can start burning and pillaging the villages."

Without warning, a spark of energy and a red fog harkened the presence of Mumm-Ra. The iridescent mist soon morphed into a transparent image of the evil mummy.

Cheetara's eyes widened when she heard Mumm-Ra's gravelly baritone boom through the chamber. "Hear me, henchmen of destruction. I have an important mission for you to accomplish. I want you to start your campaign of chaos now, so to distract the ThunderCats. Even as we speak, those feline do-gooders are searching for the Key of Thundera, which will further unlock the mysteries of the Book of Omens. But, if they're out trying to contain all the havoc you Mutants wreak, I can locate the Key before they do. I will even bring forth a troop of Mutant soldiers from the Moons of Plundarr to assist you."

Slithe, though he feared the powerful demon priest, was still skeptical. "What's in it for us, yes-s-s?"

"Once I have the Key and the Book, I will have the means to destroy the ThunderCats. Perhaps, the Book will even reveal how I can harness the power of the Eye of Thundera. Then we shall rule Third Earth together," promised Mumm-Ra.

The reptile sneered. "Once Vultureman finishes his bomb, we won't need you to destroy the ThunderCats because we'll have already done it!"

Mumm-Ra simply released a hair-raising laugh. "With your miserable track record against the ThunderCats, I wouldn't place any bets on that. Let Vultureman finish his bomb...it should be good for a laugh. In the meantime, do as I have told you or you'll live to regret it."

The visage of Mumm-Ra disappeared and Slithe's snake-like eyes narrowed in contempt. "One of these days, Mumm-Ra, we'll find out if you are truly ever living."

"Wh-what are we going to do now, Slithe?" Jackalman whimpered.

"You cowardly dog! You snivel like a beaten bitch." In a fit of anger, Slithe whipped his heavy tail around and splintered the wooden council table. "We'll do as Mumm-Ra says for now. Vultureman, return to the desert and finish your little invention. Monkian! Jackalman! Grab those crates of warp gas over there and load them onto the Sky Cutters. We have some peace to disturb, yes-s-s?"

When Cheetara realized the Mutants would be heading toward the very crates she was hidden behind, she summoned all her mental energy. Just before Monkian was about to lift the first box, the cheetah utilized her telekinetic powers to cause a shelf to fall off the wall in the adjoining chamber.

"What was that?" Slithe demanded.

The other Mutants joined him to investigate the cause of the disturbance. Cheetara seized the opportunity to make her escape. She darted out the door, only to come face to face with one of the Castle guards. Before the scaly minion could raise an alarm, the cheetah swiftly withdrew a small hypodermic needle from her arm guard and thrust it into the Mutant's neck. He blacked out immediately. Cheetara dragged his drugged body into a nearby room and covered it with a tarp lying nearby. She didn't need the Mutants to discover they had company until she was far away from the Castle. Hearing more Mutants heading her way, Cheetara decided to exit via the open window. Grabbing another thick vine, she safely descended the slippery Castle wall. Once

grounded, she burst into top speed, heading for the desert in hopes of intercepting Vultureman and his weapon of mass destruction.



Lion-O had only a few miscellaneous pieces of the spaceship's wreckage to show for the morning's search of his section of jungle. Tired and hungry, he sat beneath a swaying palm tree and chewed on a spicy strip of jerky he brought along.

Suddenly, his wrist communicator cracked to life. "Lion-O, come in. This is Tygra. Do you read me?"

"I read you, Tygra. Go ahead."

"Cheetara just checked in with me. She found out that the Mutant's are about to embark on a terrorism campaign under Mumm-Ra's orders. And while we're busy fighting the Mutants, Mumm-Ra plans to obtain the Key and the Book of Omens," Tygra added gravely.

"Where is Cheetara now?" asked Lion-O.

"She is near the Desert of Sinking Sands, waiting for Vultureman to appear and reveal the workshop where is building a giant bomb," the tiger replied.

"Get in touch with our allies and warn them about the impending attacks. Then, head for the Berbil village and wait there. Snarf should be able to handle watch over the Lair himself. I'm going to call the other ThunderCats and get back with you," Lion-O instructed.



Lord Lion-O stood and drew the Sword of Omens. Before he could summon the ThunderCats, the Sword growled signaling danger. He was on guard and ready to pounce on whatever it was rustling toward him through the bushes. He relaxed when he realized it was only Felina.

She greeted him with a weary smile. "I hope your search has gone better than mine."

"We've got bigger problems than that," Lion-O informed her. "Mumm-Ra and the Mutants have conspired to steal the Key and the Book of Omens."

Felina nervously adjusted her backpack which held the sacred tome.

"On top of that, the Mutants are going to break their silence and make themselves known with the help of some kind of bomb Vultureman is building in the desert," continued Lion-O. "So here's what we're going to do. First, let me have the Book."

Felina gave Lion-O a skeptical look. Noting her hesitation, Lion-O quickly explained, "If you keep it, that means Mumm-Ra is going to come after you. I think you've learned by your past encounters with him that he is a force to be reckoned with."

He hoped he wouldn't have to directly state the obvious truth, which was Felina did not have

the skills to defend herself or the Book from such evil. He recalled the last time he had tried such a tactic to possess the Book -- he only succeeded in angering Felina. To Lion-O's relief, his wife relented without argument and began to slip off the backpack.

"I'll take that, if you please." Mumm-Ra's icy voice seemed to surround the pair of ThunderCats.

Lion-O realized too late that the danger the Sword had earlier tried to warn him of was that of the presence of the sinister demon.



Before Lion-O could react, Mumm-Ra materialized and sent a bolt of power that blasted a two-foot crater between the unprepared cats. The shock waves from the blast sent the couple hurtling in opposite directions. Felina landed roughly on her shoulder. From the intense pain that shot down her arm, she thought she may have dislocated her shoulder. She was relieved to find she had full use of her arm. She grabbed her bow from where it lay slung across her back. Felina had no chance to even draw the bow before Mumm-Ra had her in his clutches. The mummy wrapped one of his muscular arms around her waist and flew high into the sky. Felina didn't dare struggle at such a dizzying height, temporarily preferring the cold and clammy embrace of her undead host to dropping to her certain death.



From the jungle bush where the blast had deposited him, Lion-O watched the scene helplessly. His eyes were fixed on the mummy and his hostage as they rose until they became but a speck above the earth.

"Damn that foul creature!" Lion-O cursed through gritted teeth. Lion-O sprang to his feet and took to calling his comrades with the Sword of Omens. As the red cat signal cut a swath through blue sky above, Lion-O called Cheetara on his communicator.

"Cheetara, this is Lion-O...I need you to stay there in the desert. Mumm-Ra has just captured Felina and I suspect he is taking her to the Pyramid. Has Vultureman arrived yet?"

"No," she stated simply. "I'm still waiting."

Lion-O held back a thousand curses that threatened to lend voice to his frustration. "Well, you're the closest one to the Pyramid right now, so you're going to have to abandon that part of your mission temporarily and go rescue Felina and recover the Book of Omens. Soon as I have conference with the other ThunderCats, I'll be on my way to assist you."

"Don't worry, Lion-O. I've got it covered," the cheetah replied with confidence.

No sooner did Lion-O wrap up his conversation with Cheetara, than his loyal friends arrived. The Thunder Tank rumbled into the clearing first, followed by the Thunderkittens on their space

boards. All the remaining ThunderCats were present except for Tygra.

"Where is Tygra? He should be here by now," wondered Lion-O.

"Oh, I was going to tell you," said Panthro, jumping from the Thunder Tank. "Tygra called in and said the Berbil village is under attack already. I got the impression he could handle it, but I don't think he can afford to leave those bears on their own."

Lion-O rubbed his temples as if the strain of the escalating situation were going to make his head explode. "That's fine. That's exactly the reason I wanted him in the Village in the first place. Panthro, I want you to go the Treetop Kingdom and help Willa stand guard. I have a feeling they'll be next on the Mutant checklist. Kat--I want you to swing by the Wolo and Balkan villages and make sure they are prepared for an attack. Kit--you are to stay in the jungle and continue the search for the Key of Thundera. We must find it before Mumm-Ra does, especially now that he already has the Book of Omens."

WilyKit and WilyKat were devastated that they were ordered to work separately. However, they bravely nodded in agreement with Lion-O.

Lion-O was glad to see the kittens weren't going to put up a fuss. "As for me, I'm going to the Black Pyramid to help Cheetara rescue Felina."



Felina's eyes remained squeezed tightly shut for most of the harrowing flight. When she sensed they were descending, the lioness finally summoned the courage to open her eyes. With her back still firmly pressed against Mumm-Ra's body, she was afforded an unobstructed view of the Black Pyramid upon their rapid approach. Gliding through a hole at the peak of the Pyramid, Felina batted away cobwebs and fought not to be overwhelmed by the thick musty odor which saturated the inside of Mumm-Ra's home. They touched down near the bubbling cauldron. Mumm-Ra wasted no time in ripping the backpack off Felina, sending her bow and quiver of arrows clattering to the cold, stone floor as a result. He shoved her roughly to the ground before walking to the nearby altar to inspect his prize.

The mummy's red eyes narrowed as he gazed upon the unintelligible language contained within the Book. Felina felt her throat tighten with fear, so much so that she couldn't bear to look upon Mumm-Ra any longer. She gazed up at the giant stone idols that stood guard over the cauldron. Felina wondered how many innocents had lost their lives in the name of sacrifice on the very altar by which Mumm-Ra stood. Felina suddenly felt the hairs on her neck stand on end and knew the demon's icy glare was fixed on her. She somehow found the strength to turn and meet his gaze.

"You." He spoke in a bone chilling, raspy whisper. "I don't need you to interpret this wretched Book. I will go find that Key, rendering all your knowledge useless. Ordinarily, I would just rid myself of you now. The Ancient Spirits love nothing more than a virgin sacrifice. But I think you can still serve my purposes." In one swift motion he slammed the Book shut and appeared towering over the frightened lioness. He grabbed a tuft of her hair, yanking her to her feet. Mumm-Ra forced her next to the statue of the Vulture King and proceeded to chain her leg to the

base of the stone monument. After he shackled her wrists together, Mumm-Ra flew back up through the top of the Pyramid.

Left alone in the damp chamber, Felina tugged at the thick chains that bound her, desperate to escape. After several minutes of fruitless struggle, a sudden wave of inspiration washed over her. She reached into her boot and pulled out a dagger.

"I hope I can pick the lock on this thing," she whispered, moving the dagger's tip around inside the keyhole of her ankle bond. Though only mere minutes had passed, Felina felt as if Mumm-Ra would return at any moment and severely punish her for her attempt to flee. Finally, she heard the tumbler click into place, and the bond slipped off her ankle. Unable to shake the sense that cold eyes were upon her, Felina hastily gathered her discarded backpack along with her bow and a few of the spilled arrows. Stopping by the altar, she said a silent prayer of thanks to the fates for Mumm-Ra's oversight in leaving the Book behind. With her wrists still chained, she couldn't don her backpack. So, carrying her gear by the pack's shoulder strap, she ran for a corridor on the far end of the chamber.

Once inside the shadowy passageway, she slowed her gait considerably as visibility diminished. She squinted to get a sense of what lie in the path ahead. As she cautiously walked farther, Felina realized there was ten-foot gap in the stone floor.

"Even with bound wrists, I should be able to make this jump," she assured herself.

First, Felina threw the backpack with all her might. The leather pack, with her weaponry attached, sailed easily over the pit. A cloud of dust stirred where it clattered to the floor. She paused to peer into the depths of the hole. The lioness could tell that something awaited at the bottom for the unlucky soul foolish enough take a fall. But what exactly it was she wasn't sure. Felina backed up twenty paces and inhaled deeply. Holding her chained wrists close to her body, she darted forward. When she reached the edge of the gap, Felina vaulted herself into the air. Just when she thought she was going to clear the distance the floor moved, widening the gap. Felina's eyes mirrored the deceptive floor's action, widening in horror. She frantically extended her arms, hoping to grasp the edge. Felina slammed into the hard wall of the pit's far side, her fingertips barely sustaining their hold on the edge. She fought desperately for a foothold, but the slippery stone walls denied her efforts. Unrestrained terror gripped the hapless lioness. Her fingers were no longer able to support her weight. Eyes closed tightly, she braced herself for impact.

Felina's eyes flew open when her free fall was jarringly stopped by two strong hands wrapped around her wrists. She stared up into the face of Cheetara, taking a moment to realize she'd been saved. Cheetara strained to pull the lioness to safety.

"Cheetara!" Felina finally managed to gasp. "Thank the fates you showed up."

"Mmmm," replied Cheetara, seemingly preoccupied. "Let's get out of here quickly. Hopefully, Vultureman hasn't arrived in the desert yet and we'll be able to follow him to what I assume is his hidden workshop."

Felina gathered her gear and hurried to catch up to the determined cheetah. "Um...would you mind helping me with these?" she asked, rattling the chains that bound her wrists.

Cheetara looked apologetic. "Of course! You must excuse me. I tend to get a little, uh, intense when I'm on a mission."

Cheetara took her staff out of its sheath and extended it to its full length. "Put your palms on the ground and spread them as far apart as possible," she instructed.

Felina knelt and did as she was told. She was a bit nervous that the short length of chain didn't leave much room for error, but Felina had faith in her fellow Thunderian's skill. Without hesitation, Cheetara lifted her staff and brought it down with all her strength. Felina squinted

from the brilliant flash of light that the staff and chain created on contact. To her relief, one strike did the trick. Felina quickly secured her backpack, and the two cats headed out of the Pyramid.



The afternoon sun proved a drastic change from the dark confines of the Pyramid. It took the pair a moment to let their eyes adjust. Cheetara surveyed the hot desert sands for any sign of Mutant activity. She finally spotted what was most likely Vultureman's Flying Machine on the horizon, just to the east of the old city ruins.

"Damn it," cursed Cheetara. "He's already landed." She sighed heavily. "I suppose I should check in with Lion-O." Cheetara spoke into her voice-activated communicator. "Lion-O, this is Cheetara. Please respond."

The Lord's response was immediate. "Lion-O here. What do you have to report?"

Cheetara did her best to try not to sound defeated. "On the plus side, I've got Felina and the Book. I saw Mumm-Ra fly from the Pyramid in the direction of the jungle, so it wasn't a hard rescue in the least. However, Vultureman has already landed near the ruins. We're going over there to investigate now."

"I'm still heading your way. I've got the other ThunderCats dispersed throughout our allies' villages. It looks as though the Mutants have an army that's attacking several areas at once...the old divide and conquer strategy I'm afraid," he replied.

Before Cheetara could comment, a Sky Cutter was fast approaching and began firing on them. "Run!" she ordered Felina, "Run for that rock formation over there!" They needed to get behind some cover fast. Cheetara knew she could make it, she just hoped Felina could close the 200-yard distance before Monkian had a chance to circle around and attack again.

Cheetara took off, with Felina close behind at first. However, the distance between them soon doubled, then tripled. The swift cheetah dived behind the cluster of sandstone boulders just as Monkian dropped a pair of missiles nearby. Cheetara covered her ears in response to the deafening noise. She peeked around one of the rocks and searched the desert for Felina. However, she could hardly see due to all the sand and dust Monkian's bombardment had stirred up.

"She should be here by now," Cheetara thought grimly. "By Jaga, what if she was--" Cheetara couldn't bring herself to finish the thought. "No," she decided, her mouth set into a firm line. "I can sense Felina is still alive somewhere. But something has happened to her, and damned if I know what..."



WilyKit tried to stay focused on her task. She repeatedly referred to the folded picture she had of the Key of Thundera. The golden key was truly a work of fine Thunderian craftsmanship. The key was plated with intricately carved gold. The head of the key was a large ThunderCat insignia, composed of black onyx inlaid in polished ruby. The entire Key probably measured no more than 12 inches, making the task of finding it in the vast jungle seem almost ludicrous to the kitten. She pressed on, however, trying not to let the distant sounds of the various battles raging throughout the countryside distract her farther.

Flying low to the ground on her space board, WilyKit caught sight of a glittering object in the low-lying area to her right. Hopping off the board, she rummaged noisily through the foliage. WilyKit's heart skipped a beat when she saw the object was emblazoned with the ThunderCat insignia. She hastily grabbed it out from under the brambles, only to throw it back to the earth almost immediately. WilyKit let out a sharp yelp and sucked on her sliced palm. Her heart sank as she realized what she had found was not the Key, but a jagged piece of debris from the Thunderian spaceship that had brought Felina to Third Earth.

WilyKit studied her wound. "Hmmp. Doesn't even look like this one will need stitches," she muttered to herself. "Sure hurts though."

She began to shake her injured hand furiously but stopped abruptly. She had the sudden feeling she was no longer alone in the jungle. Every hair stood up on the kitten's neck. WilyKit knew she should be trying to hide, but fear had her legs seemingly paralyzed. With all her will she finally convinced her legs to carry her to the space board she left hovering nearby. Bounding onto the board, she turned sharply in the direction of the Wolo villages. Her eyes widened in fear as she nearly collided into Mumm-Ra. The undead mummy towered over her in his Ever-Living form, a smirk plastered on his ashen face.

Thinking fast, WilyKit rolled off her space board and scampered through the jungle. Once she was deep into the forest, she slowed and looked behind her. Her eyes narrowed, due to the jungle's lush canopy blocking of the afternoon sun. She could see no sign of Mumm-Ra. Instead of feeling comfort, WilyKit's dread increased ten-fold. She still felt as if her doom was just around the next giant fern. Without warning, a pair of hands reached out from a great, hollowed tree and grabbed WilyKit. The Thunderkitten tried to scream, but one of her assailant's hands was cupped over her mouth, rendering her screams impotent whimpers.

WilyKit struggled. She finally succeeded in digging her claws into the arm that gripped her waist. She was dropped immediately. WilyKit backed away, pushing herself with the hands and feet. The kitten fully expected to see the red glow of Mumm-Ra's eyes. She was shocked to notice her captor was quite short in stature--too short to be Mumm-Ra.

A patch of mottled sunlight filtered in through a knothole in the tree trunk. WilyKit squinted at the stranger, his features slowly coming into focus in the dim light. "Could it be?" she wondered. Her eyes widened in surprise.

"Alderan? Is it really you?" the kitten squealed. She couldn't believe the Emite elder had survived the great jungle fire. "Sorry I scratched ya," she added sheepishly.

Alderan pressed a long, bony index finger to his lips and shook his head slowly. "Evil one is nearby," came his barely audible whisper.

They both sat in silence for several minutes and listened intently. WilyKit knew that hiding in the hollow tree wouldn't afford them protection for long. Mumm-Ra had his ways of finding anyone he desired getting his decayed hands on. Hit by sudden inspiration, she rummaged

through her utility belt hoping she had brought the right pellet. A sly smile spread across her lips as she clasped a flare pellet. She popped the capsule open and sat it in front of the triangular opening in the tree. In the golden light of the sparkling flare, WilyKit truly looked impish.

Alderan stared at the kitten, his mouth agape, as she proceeded to speak in a loud voice. "All right, you pathetic pile of putrid, rotten flesh! Come and get me, if you dare!" taunted WilyKit.

WilyKit had just enough time to retrieve a small object from the back of her belt before Mumm-Ra thrust his head into the three's opening, his eyes burning bright red with anger.

"If I dare?" roared the mummy, his slimy spittle flying. "Foolish brat, you are no match for--" He stopped in mid-tirade. WilyKit flipped open the square device to reveal a mirror. Mortified by his own horrid reflection, Mumm-Ra vanished amid his anguished screams.

The Emite stood in utter amazement. "You beat that devil with...with a mirror?"

"Yeah," replied WilyKit, while trying to brush a string of Mumm-Ra's saliva off her arm. "When all else fails, he can't stand to look into the face of his own evil." Her face screwed up into a comical grimace as the viscous strand of spittle hung from her fingertips. "And you'd think in the thousands of years he's been around he would've heard the phrase 'say it, don't spray it.' Yech!" When no response came from the Emite, WilyKit turned to see he had vanished.



Felina looked up into the huge tunnel she had just fallen down. One second, she had been trying furiously to keep up with Cheetara, and the next instant the ground opened up and swallowed her. The tunnel dumped her into a narrow but well-lit hallway. Everything was fashioned out of steel and quite modern.

"That rules out this being any sort of ancient underground passages that lead to the Pyramid," Felina determined. She stood at the intersection of two corridors, trying to decide which path to take, when she heard faint sounds of Mutant arguing. She dashed down the side corridor and crouched beside a barrel. She listened to Vultureman rant to one of his cronies as he walked down the hall she had just abandoned.

"Caaaaw! I hope Monkian succeeded in blowing those she-cats to bits. Did those fools think I wouldn't notice them snooping around my base? I just hope Slithe and Jackalman get here soon. I need them to help monitor the premises so I can load the bomb onto the Flying Machine. As for you brainless guards, search the base and make sure we haven't acquired any pretty little spies. Obliterate any intruders on sight," commanded Vultureman.

Felina sighed in relief when the guard headed down the opposite end of the hall she occupied. The lioness decided to take the opportunity to try to patch in with Cheetara on her communicator. "This wouldn't work in the Pyramid, so I hope it works underground," she silently hoped.

"This is Felina calling Cheetara. Please come in."

Felina was never so glad to hear Cheetara's silken voice. "I knew you were still with us, Felina. Where are you?"

"I fell into some kind of underground Mutant stronghold. Vultureman is down here and I think his bomb project is as well," Felina replied in hushed tones.

"Lion-O has joined me up here. We'll try to get down to you. In the meantime, find that bomb.

When you do, patch in with Panthro. He will be able to tell you how to defuse it," instructed Cheetara.

Felina's stomach did a somersault at the thought of disarming such a weapon. She summoned enough courage to respond shortly, "Will do."

She rose from her hiding spot and decided to go in the direction Vultureman had went. Surprisingly, the lioness didn't run into trouble navigating the long hall. She was grateful, as the narrow passage didn't leave her many options for cover. The hall ended at a thick steel door, with a small window near the top. Felina had to push herself up on tip toe to cautiously peer through the pane. She saw Vultureman bent over what must be his pet project. The huge orb was at least twice her height and could easily fill up the entire rear area of the Thunder Tank. Vultureman was actually standing on a scaffold to tinker with his creation.

Felina was in the midst of brainstorming a way into the room when she witnessed a Mutant henchman motion for Vultureman to come with him. They exited out the large cargo doors on the opposite side of the room. "Here's my chance," she muttered.

Her heart sank when she twisted the metal handle on the door and met resistance. "Locked!" she cried. Felina noticed a keyboard panel on the wall that must be some kind of code device with which to gain entry. She groaned in frustration. "The laws of probability say I could be here for decades and never stumble upon the right combination," she thought. She considered trying to find a way to the cargo doors on the other side, but that seemed too risky with all the guards on the lookout for intruders. "This must be why this hall isn't heavily patrolled...you need a damn code to get in this way."

"Well, I've got to try," she conceded. Felina tried several random combinations of digits, only to receive the computer's mechanical response of 'Error, wrong code'. Having reached her limit on patience, Felina stood back and drew her bow. It only took one shot to transform the keypad to a mangled mess.

"Looks like I'm going to have to do this the hard way, but at least nobody else is able to get in this way now." Just as she turned to venture back down the corridor, the door creaked open. A satisfied grin spread across her face, and she inwardly congratulated herself. "Ha! Who says losing your temper never gets you anywhere?"

The lioness crept into Vultureman's workshop, searching for signs that anyone else occupied the room. Once she determined she was alone, she hoisted herself up onto the scaffolding and peered into the open panel where Vultureman had been working. Mechanical inclination was something she surely lacked.

"Panthro, this is Felina. Please respond," she quietly spoke into her communicator.

She could barely hear the panther's reply over the roar of the Thunder Tank's engine. "This is Panthro. Go ahead."

"I've found the bomb. It's huge. Big enough to reduce the Lair to a crater. Got any ideas on how to defuse it?" Felina asked.

"No offense but this doesn't sound like a job for amateurs. I'm on my way with Tygra in the Tank. Luckily, Turmagar sent in some Tuska reinforcements so we could help. Can you wait until we get there?" Panthro said.

Felina would give the fates anything to have someone else disarm this weapon, but she knew time constraints made Panthro's request impossible. "I'm sorry, but I'm afraid you'll have to talk me through it. Vultureman is only temporarily distracted and I believe they aim to load the bomb onto his ship when he returns."

The next sound to come over her communicator was unintelligible. Felina guessed it was the

old panther's irritated grumbles. "This isn't going to be easy. Find the timing device on the thing. It should be under a panel somewhere if I know anything about Mutant arms."

"Luck of the fates," Felina exclaimed. "I believe I'm looking at just such a thing. It's an LCD display with a numbered keypad below it."

"Good. Now carefully remove that panel. The face should unscrew and lift off to reveal a mess of wires underneath," Panthro advised.

Felina swallowed hard. "Okay." She retrieved her dagger and proceeded to use it as a makeshift screwdriver. Once all six screws were out, Felina clenched her sweating palms and prepared to continue with the delicate operation. She scarcely took a breath as she lifted the panel slowly upward. She saw why Panthro had wanted her to be vigilant because many of the wires were tangled in the circuitry behind the panel. Felina suspected disconnecting the wrong wire would set the bomb off. She gingerly untangled the wires. Although the panel was still connected to the bomb, its connecting wire was long enough to allow her to set it aside. She let out a mighty breath and jumped when Panthro's deep voice boomed over her communicator.

"Felina? Are you still....there?" he asked.

"Yes. the panel is off and I see the wires. There must be at least two dozen. Most are black, but there are a few red and yellow wires as well," Felina told him.

There was a short silence. "Are you sure there aren't any blue wires?"

Felina carefully double checked. "Uh...I'm sure. No blue at all."

"Those damned Mutants aren't consistent with anything," Panthro growled. "No wonder they can't advance. Anyhow, find the wire that is connected to a breaker. I don't give a damn what color it is, cut that one."

Felina's roiling stomach stirred waves of nausea. Her heart beating furiously, she traced the path of each wire. One of the yellow ones appeared to lead to what one might assume is a breaker. With a shaking hand, she picked up her dagger.

"Felina, have you found the right wire?" Panthro demanded.

"How...how will we know if I cut the right one?" she stammered.

Panthro's sigh was audible over the communicator. "If it's the right one, you'll hear the humming generated by the bomb stop. If it's the wrong one you won't know it, but we will."

As much as she didn't want to die, the lioness knew that even if she failed the bomb would be destroyed with her and that was at least some consolation. Just as Felina reached for the yellow wire, laser cannon beams whizzed past her head.

"Mutants!" she cried while falling to the floor of the scaffold. Some of the errant shots hit the bomb, severely damaging it.

"Fools!" she heard Vultureman wail. "You'll blow us all sky high!"

Felina's eyes widened in horror as the LCD display on the dangling panel lit up and began ticking the seconds to detonation. She had less than two minutes to get as far away as possible.

"Felina? Felina! What's going on? Dammit, answer me!" Panthro shouted, but she couldn't spare the precious seconds it would take to reply. Felina slid off the scaffold and bolted for the door. Luckily, the Mutants also realized the direness of the situation and chose to flee likewise, rather than pursue her. She ran down the hallway, as alarm systems blared throughout the base. Ignoring the stitch in her side and the aluminum taste in her mouth, she pushed herself to run harder. At last, the chute she had entered through came into view. She leapt while still running and vaulted herself high enough to easily reach a rung of the steel ladder that ran up the tube. Dangling by one arm, she was just about to begin her ascent when she noticed a Mutant pup huddled against the wall of the corridor.

"Mutant or not, I can't leave a child to die like this," Felina decided. She dropped to the floor and approached the frightened pup. Felina guessed he was from the jackal breed of Mutants and not much more than 7 or 8 years old. She extended her hand to the child. He hesitated, still sitting with his knees pressed to his chest and casting Felina a mistrustful look.

"Please," Felina pleaded. "Take my hand. We don't have much time!" The boy finally grabbed her hand, though the mistrust still shone in his golden eyes. Felina pushed her backpack to one side and knelt down. "Now, climb up onto my back and hold on."

Once the pup had a secure hold, Felina backed up to get another run at the chute. Carrying the extra weight caused her to fall short of her goal. "We're both doomed," Felina thought in anguish, as her fingers passed within inches of the rung. The child surprised her by skillfully wrapping a lasso around the fifth rung up, preventing their fall. Felina quickly grabbed the ladder and began clearing the rungs by leaps and bounds. When they reached the top, Felina panicked. No matter how hard she pushed, the ceiling wouldn't give.

Felina gasped as the blaring alarms ceased, followed in an instant by the thunderous blast of the bomb. As the heat and concussion from the blast made its way toward the hapless pair, the rocking of the explosion caused the hatch of the chute to cave in. Felina gripped the top rung tightly as chunks of metal and sand rained down upon them. Felina had barely pulled them to the surface when the blast caught up with them, blowing her and the child clear of the hole and burying them in a foot of sand.



Panthro came tearing into the desert in the Thunder Tank. He saw Lion-O and Cheetara running toward him from the old ruins and steered the Tank in their direction. Suddenly, the earth shook from the bomb blast and Panthro fought to control the Tank, eventually bringing it to a screeching halt. Tygra and Panthro sat in silence once things calmed down, both knowing full well what the blast meant. Lion-O and Cheetara joined the somber pair moments later.

"Dammit," Panthro softly cursed.

Lion-O was almost afraid to ask, but he had to know. "Was Felina still down there when that thing went off?"

Tygra avoided Lion-O's intense gaze. "Most likely...yes."

"Great holy Jaga!" exclaimed Lion-O.

"We heard her say something about Mutants. Then we lost communication with her minutes before the explosion. I don't see how she could have..." Panthro trailed off, sensing his usual bluntness wouldn't be appreciated this time.

"Wait," Cheetara interjected, closing her eyes. "I feel that...I feel that she's still alive. Here in the desert somewhere."

"Since she hasn't tried to contact us, she must be hurt, so let's get a search going," ordered Lion-O.

Cheetara and Lion-O jumped into the Thunder Tank. "What about those blasted Mutants? Are they still lurking around here?" Panthro asked Cheetara.

"Well, we saw Monkian follow Slithe and Jackalman down to the base after they arrived. We were about to pursue them when the bomb went off. I sense they're still alive as well, but in what condition I can't say," she replied.

"We'll have to keep our guard up," advised Tygra.

The cats ventured to the area of desert where the sands had been blown out, leaving a scorched crater. Cheetara studied the hole that was ground zero. The others waited patiently for her to get a sense of where Felina might be.

"She made it pretty far from here," Cheetara finally spoke. "She's out about a half a mile that way. Near those boulders," she said, pointing in the direction of the Pyramid.

Once they reached the point Cheetara had prescribed, they walked around inspecting the area. Panthro looked at the heaps of sand skeptically. "Cheetara, you said she made it to the surface...but where?"

"She probably was buried by all the sand the blast kicked around," deduced Tygra.

Without wasting another moment, Lion-O peered through the holes in the hilt of the Sword and commanded it to give him sight beyond sight. "The Sword showed me that she's underneath this mound of sand," he said, heading to a nearby dune.

All four cats began to dig. It wasn't long before Felina's purple uniform became visible. Tygra located one of her arms and pulled the lioness from her sandy prison. He brushed away the sand that was caked around her nose and mouth. Felina sharply gasped for air.

"By Jaga, it's a miracle," Panthro said, astounded. "How the hell did you survive such a blast?"

Felina spit out a mouthful of gritty sand before she answered. "We barely made it out when the explosion occurred."

"We?" Lion-O asked as he helped her stand.

Felina still felt a little lightheaded, making it quite an effort to gather her thoughts. "Yes. There was a child. Where's the child?"

Tygra tried to calm the agitated lioness. "Felina, what are you saying? There was a child in a Mutant war base?"

"I say you check her for head injuries, Tygra. I think she's imagining things," jested Panthro.

"No," Felina insisted, her head beginning to clear. "There was a child. A jackal pup. He was on my back when..." She stopped short and began to frantically dig. She paused to look at her fellow Thunderians. They held expressions of concern and disbelief on their faces. "Aren't you going to help me?"

With a reluctance that suggested they were merely humoring her, they joined Felina in the search. Cheetara was shocked when she unearthed the golden furred hand of the child. "Over here," she called to the group. "I think I've found him."

"He's still alive," Tygra declared upon inspecting the pup. "But he's going to need some medical attention. Let's get him back to the Lair."

"Whoa! He may be a child but he's still a Mutant," cautioned Panthro. "Do you really think it's wise to--"

Panthro stopped short when he heard the familiar roar of the Thunder Tank's engine. He turned and emitted a furious growl. "Mutants! In my Thunder Tank!"



Vultureman sat with his arms crossed in the passenger seat of the Thunder Tank, glaring at Monkian. "I'm the one who's taken the time to read the blueprints to this kitty-mobile. I should be the one to drive! You don't know what you're doing, Monkian! Caaaw!"

Monkian grunted. "Well, I'm the one who stole the blueprints. And besides, I got here first."

Slithe leaned over the wall that divided the front and rear compartments. "You two fools stop squabbling and get this Tank back to Castle Plundarr. Those wretched cats are coming after us. Look!"

Vultureman and Monkian looked in the direction Slithe suggested. Each recoiled at the sight of the ThunderCats running toward them. Monkian fumbled to find the lever that would send the Tank on its way.

"It's this one beside you, genius," Vultureman said coolly, gesturing to the shifter on the floor between them.

"Hoo hoo! I knew that," fibbed Monkian. The brawny ape yanked the lever all the way forward, causing the Tank to lurch violently forward. The momentum sent Slithe tumbling into Jackalman in the back of the Tank.

Vultureman gripped the side of the vehicle with all his might, fighting to remain in his seat as the Thunder Tank wildly fish tailed. "Idiot!" the bird wailed. "Turn the butterfly handle in front of you!"

Monkian obeyed and the Tank straightened out. He turned the Tank and headed full throttle for the forest bordering the desert. Vultureman relaxed enough to click on the telescreen in front of him. He was disheartened to see that Cheetara was in close pursuit.

"Slithe!" Vultureman cried as he leaned into the hole between the seats. "Get that cannon up and running and blast that cheetah!"

Slithe acted as though he hadn't heard Vultureman. "Jackalman! Get behind this cannon and blow that ThunderCat woman to bits!" he ordered. "I'll show Vultureman who's giving the orders around here, yes-s-s," Slithe added under his breath.

Jackalman dutifully jumped onto the platform behind the tank's huge laser cannon and fumbled with the various knobs and buttons. At last he succeeded in finding the button that powered the great weapon. The platform rose and he could see Cheetara a mere 10 yards behind the tank and closing the distance fast. At this point, they had already made it into the forest, speeding down a two-track trail. The uneven terrain made the task of locking in on his target difficult for Jackalman. Cheetara was easily able to avoid the first shot.

Just as Jackalman sent off the next blast, the tank hit a depression in the path and flipped over several times, throwing Slithe and the jackal from the vehicle. When the Thunder Tank finally came to rest, Vultureman was amazed they had landed right side up and suffered little injury.

Monkian appeared a bit dazed. "Woo hoo, I didn't see that dip in the road," he explained meekly.

Vultureman glared at the simian. "You *are* the dip in the road! Now get this contraption moving again!"

Monkian tried in vain to get the engine to turn over. "It won't start!" Glancing up, he noticed Cheetara was distracted by some kind of commotion behind her. "Let's abandon ship now before the rest of them get here."

Vultureman was about to protest when his keen eyes caught sight of Lion-O bounding toward them, an almost murderous expression on his face. "Caaaw! That suggestion is the first sign of life I've witnessed from your single brain cell all day."

Ignoring the insult, Monkian dived over Vultureman and scampered through the forest, quickly passing a sluggish Slithe and a limping Jackalman. Vultureman started to follow, but his curiosity got the better of him. He crouched down amid some foliage near the Tank to eavesdrop. He could see the lion and the cheetah clearly, but he was sure they couldn't see him.

"Lion-O," Vultureman heard Cheetara plead. "What happened back there?" She glanced worriedly down the trail.

"Just let me at those Mutants!" Lion-O's voice shook with emotion. "They're going to feel the wrath of Jaga for what they did to Panthro."

Cheetara grabbed Lion-O's arm before he could pursue the Mutants. "It's too late, they've all run. If Panthro is hurt, we have to concentrate on getting him back home. Seeking vengeance isn't going to help him right now."

A jolt of fear shot through Vultureman when it looked as though Lion-O was going to ignore the woman's wise words and seek his bloody revenge. Vultureman relaxed when the lion's expression softened.

"What happened?" Cheetara asked gently.

"That last shot...it may have missed you by a mile, but Panthro took a direct hit." Lion-O paused, grappling with his emotions. "It doesn't look good, Cheetara."

Vultureman saw Tygra approaching with the bloodied panther in his arms. He was followed by the female lion who appeared to be holding a child. A mutant child.

"Where did they find that jackal pup?" Vultureman wondered. "I didn't know there were any Mutant children on Third Earth." He watched Lion-O and Cheetara rush to meet with Tygra and their wounded friend. "I'd love to stick around and see what kind of damage we'd done, but I'll never have a better chance to sneak away," the Mutant reasoned as he crept deep into the forest. "With any luck, the panther received a mortal wound. If so, that will be one down, six to go!" Vultureman cackled softly and prayed that the spirits of death would visit Panthro.



It was nearly four o'clock in the morning and none of the cats had gone to bed. Cheetara sat in the lounge, looking across the room at Felina. The lioness sat exhausted, her face resting in her hands. Cheetara remembered how Felina had put up a brave front while assisting Tygra in the gruesome surgery. But the cheetah's suspicions that Felina had never witnessed such graphic injuries were confirmed when she heard the lioness retching in the washroom post-surgery.

As tired as they all were, nobody could sleep. Though Panthro was stabilized, there were still some perilous hours that lie ahead. "Even if he does survive," Cheetara thought wearily, "he'll never be the same. Jaga only knows how Panthro will handle it when he awakens to find he's missing a leg."

Her thoughts were interrupted by the Thunderkittens' loud entrance. Felina didn't look up when the kids entered, and Cheetara wondered if the poor girl had fallen asleep in such an awkward pose.

"Shouldn't you kids be in bed?" Cheetara asked.

"Well, we've been checking up on the little jackal since we haven't been allowed to see Panthro yet," explained WilyKit. "The pup still hasn't woke up."

WilyKat seemed impatient. "How's Panthro doing? You guys haven't even told us how bad it is."

"Ask the doctor," advised Cheetara, motioning to Tygra sitting next to her.

"I guess you two have to know sooner or later," Tygra began. "As you know, Panthro took a hit from the Tank's laser cannon. The blast took off his right leg, just below the knee."

The kittens gasped in unison. "Poor Panthro!" cried WilyKit.

"You couldn't save the limb?" WilyKat wondered.

"Well, there was nothing to, uh, save, Kat. When the stump heals, we can fit him for a prosthetic. There should be no reason why he can't walk again," Tygra assured them. "As long as infection doesn't set in, Panthro should survive."

WilyKit was on the verge of tears. "I just don't understand. Why do the Mutants and ThunderCats have to fight all the time? Surely there must be some way to live together in peace."

Tygra sighed. "Dear kitten, I wish I knew. The rivalry between our peoples goes back centuries. But you must remember, not all Mutants are bad. Some have been great allies with the ThunderCats. It's the power-hungry ones like Slithe that we must guard against."

Cheetara stood and wandered to the window, where Lion-O was standing. He acknowledged her with a brief nod before plunging back into whatever deep thoughts he had been pondering. Cheetara gazed out onto the now peaceful countryside. Though none of their allies were overcome, the Mutant forces managed to cause considerable damage to many communities. And the Key of Thundera, which was the inspiration for all that destruction, was still unaccounted for.

"All that fighting, all that violence...for what?" Cheetara wondered, resting a hand on her belly. "And now that I will be bringing a cub into this vicious world, I'm beginning to wonder if there will ever be a generation of ThunderCats born that won't have to experience the pain and loss of war." Though grateful that after all their attempts, she and Tygra would finally be parents, she was oddly conflicted about it. Cheetara knew she must tell the others soon of her condition. And yet she wondered if her friends' joy would also be tainted by the same undercurrent of sadness that she felt.

"Oh my unborn child," Cheetara lamented inwardly, "I shudder to think of the tragedies you will surely witness; the deep sorrow you will feel. Great Jaga, I may not even live to see you grow to adulthood, just as my parents never witnessed my transition to womanhood." A single, silent tear trekked down Cheetara's face.

Reign of blows cascading down around your shoulders

Far too many men dressed up as soldiers...

Reign of blows precedes the storm of revolution

People have no place in their solution...

Reign of blows has washed away the corpse of Abel

Cain is now the king in every Babel

I just don't care who you are

When death draws up in his car

And talks in terrorist tones

*Remember violence is only a vote
For the black queen to take back the throne*

--Reign of Blows, XTC