Spellbound
by Cheezey
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Chapter Three

Tygra was able to find Celeste's village again with ease, in fact with such ease it would almost suggest that some force drew him there. When he approached the limits of the hidden settlement, Celeste emerged from the misty night fog and greeted him with a beaming smile and a warm embrace. "Tygra! What a delightful surprise to have you back so soon!"

"I said I would, and I'm a cat of my word," he answered with a smile, one that grew broader the longer he looked upon her lovely face. "I—I couldn't stop thinking about you after I left. I couldn't wait to see you again."

That time it was Celeste's smile that widened, although Tygra did not pick up on the distinctly smug edge to it. "I'm so very flattered," she replied sweetly. "It's an honor to catch the attentions of a handsome warrior like yourself." She took his hand in hers. "Welcome back. Shall we go back to the estate?"

"I'd love to." He squeezed her delicate hand, so graceful and small in comparison to his feline ones, and walked with her to the palatial manor that was her home. She led him to the same courtyard they had spent time at earlier, and that time he found it even more enticing without the worry about Cheetara hanging over him. He noticed Celeste and Damien's servant girl pouring fresh wine nearby, although Celeste quickly dismissed her with a silent wave so that they were alone. Once she was gone, Celeste picked up the wine glasses the girl had poured and sat beside Tygra on a double-seated lounge.

Tygra took the drink Celeste offered him and sipped at the sweet wine. "I probably didn't get a chance to tell you before, but this is delicious. We don't have anything like this at the Lair. I don't think the Berbils, Wollos, or any of the other races we trade with make anything even close to it."

Celeste nodded and took a sip of her drink. "It's a special vintage that we create here. The recipe is unique to our kind, and we don't share it. Only those that have been to our village have had the privilege and pleasure of tasting it." She set her drink back down and drew him into her gaze with a suggestive and flirtatious look. "But that's just one of the many things you can only find here."

"Such as?" Tygra asked curiously, and she smiled back at him with an air of mystery.

"You'll see in time, my dear Tygra."

Out in the unicorn forest, Damien leaned against the trunk of a large elm tree smugly, waiting for Chilla to arrive. His scrying powers had shown him the vision of Chilla getting angry and leaving Skytomb, and he knew without a doubt that she was on her way to find him. After all, that was exactly what he had planned to ensure that he would have her for his toy and his alone. He was surprised at how easy the ice Lunatac had been to charm, given her frosty demeanor and distrust of strangers, but it seemed that even one made of ice could be melted with enough sweet words and magical wine to help her to "forget" her troubles, and the rest of her mortal friends right along with them. Once they were out of her mind, he could take all that he wanted from her with abandon, and by the time she would wise up to what was happening, she would have too little power to do anything about it, just like all the others. The once fearsome Chilla would be little more than a corporeal spirit bound to him, her ice blue shade a pretty slave to adorn his home for all time.

When he saw her approaching, he summoned the most charming smile he could and called out to her. "Chilla!"

"Damien!" she said, brightening visibly as she saw him waiting for her. "How did you know I came to find you?"

The dark-haired man draped an arm around Chilla's shoulders, and to his delight she made no move to rebuff the gesture, instead falling naturally into it. "I could sense your distress," he told her in a sympathetic tone. "I know I warned you about your friends, but I'm sorry to see how right I was about them after all. You deserve better."

A frown flashed across her face as she thought about them. "It's not any surprise to me that they're obnoxious, but the complete lack of respect… argh!" She exhaled a frosty breath of frustration. "See if I ever bother to try and help those idiots again. Making the lewd comments about you and me was disgusting enough, but those Mutants! The nerve of accusing me of bothering to do attack that useless Jackalman! That flea-ridden fool wouldn't be worth the breath it'd take to ice him."

Damien pulled her closer to him and planted a light kiss on her forehead. "My dear Chilla, how terrible that you had to put up with such idiocy and ingratitude." He looked into her eyes, drawing her into his gaze. "Would an offer to stay with me at my home for a time cheer you up? Perhaps you can stay there while you think it all over?"

"As your guest?" She raised an eyebrow, as if the offer seemed too good to be true. Chilla was used to intimidating her way into getting what she wanted, rather than have it be freely offered without strings. Lunatacs were rarely so generous without an ulterior motive.

"My most *honored* guest," Damien emphasized, and grinned at her. "I'll treat you to a nice dinner, some wine, a lovely room, and you can forget all about them for as long as you want. In my home, you'll be treated like a queen."

That tempting description was all the convincing Chilla needed. "Lead the way."

On her way back from the kitchen where she had gone after Celeste dismissed her, the servant called Mirlana peered into her masters' courtyard just in time to see Celeste pull her Thundercat guest into a passionate kiss. While the tiger was clearly delighted, Mirlana winced at the sight, knowing all too well what her mistress was doing and what fate awaited the tiger. *So they've chosen to start feeding again,* she lamented silently, feeling like it was only a short while ago that they had toyed with their last victims in such a way. That was the part that bothered her the most, the way that Celeste and Damien both played so cruelly with the hearts of those they sought to fulfill their unnatural needs. Each time it was harder and harder for her to witness, powerless to do anything about it. She quickened her pace as she walked away from the courtyard, trying as she always did not to think about how Damien had seduced her that same way all those years—and she did not even remember how many years it was now—ago. When she rounded the corner she then saw Damien, and on his arm was his newest prize, the strange ice woman called Chilla. "Oh no," Mirlana muttered to herself, "that fool came back too!"

Damien paused when he noticed his servant's presence, and gestured for her to come over. "Mirlana, take Chilla to our guest quarters, and see to it that she's made comfortable. I'm going to speak with my sister, but I'll be back shortly."

Mirlana nodded obediently, as she had no other choice but to do so. Defying Damien would be risking banishment from the village, and for one such as her who had already been a victim of her masters, that meant certain death. It was the place's magic that kept her alive, and while she would live forever if she remained there, if she left she would perish almost instantly.

Meanwhile, Damien turned to Chilla. "You're in good hands, my dear." He leaned forward and placed a kiss on her cool lips, and then left.

"Come this way." Mirlana beckoned to Chilla and led her through the manor's twisting corridors into a lavish room filled with plush furniture and ornamental plants. The windows were large and open to the air, creating a constant breeze that some would find chilly, but to Chilla was rather pleasant. "You can help yourself to anything you want. There's clothes in the chest, and a bath in the adjoining room."

"Does it run cold?" Chilla asked.

A wan smile crossed Mirlana's face. "It runs however you want it to. That's the nature of this place."

"Wow," Chilla said, not catching the full meaning of Mirlana's words. "This is the good life."

The servant wished that she could correct her on that, but she did not dare. Instead all she said was, "So it appears," and drew the drapes aside to allow more air flow.

Her answer surprised Chilla, and she thought haughtily that Mirlana must be as human as she looked if she was foolish enough to not realize how cushy she had it serving masters like she had

in an ideal place like that. “What, you don’t agree?” she said, eyeing the girl in a way that made her thoughts clear.

Mirlana only sighed, resigned that this one would be no different from the others. They never wanted to question what looked so ideal. She had not either, after all. She only wished that she had been sharp enough to notice the subtle cues as to the true nature of Damien and his domicile back when she might have had a chance to save herself from it. “Things aren’t always what they seem,” she told Chilla as she finished her task and started for the door. “Keep that in mind, while you still can,” she finished quietly, and then left before she said more than that and put herself in danger. Chilla regarded her with a puzzled look, but did not say anything before she departed.

As she made her way back downstairs, Mirlana wondered if Chilla would see it coming, or if the tiger Celeste had latched onto would. The scenario was almost always the same, with only the names and faces and little parts changing at the whims of her masters. Long ago, Damien had come upon her in the forest and had seduced her with flattering words and the charm that she had now come to loathe and detest rather than bask in. He had convinced her that she would be happier with him than she would with her sister warrior maidens, and when he had first taken her in she had never been happier. The challenges of survival were gone, and there were no storms, no worries about food shortages, and no invasions of enemies or even the threat of beings such as Mumm-Ra the Ever-Living. Fun and laughter, pleasure and love were offered in abundance to her, at least while she still had true life energy for him to feed off of when they were together. But Damien’s appetites were hearty, and his lust was never satisfied, and before long the vital energy he sought from her was used up, and she went from being his lover to his slave. At first she thought she had taken ill, but Damien explained it to her then, and oh-so-magnanimously offered her the chance to live forever, as long as she stayed with and served him in his home. He and Celeste would keep her alive and safe, just like the others, but they could never leave, and never, ever defy or question them. If she did, he had warned her, she would wither and die in banishment. She had seen instances of it with others who grew tired of their games, and knew it was not an idle threat. However sometimes there were times, such as that night, when she wondered for a moment if she would not be better off in the afterlife after sticking it to them for what they had done. Fear of death, and of damnation for her actions, for standing by and aiding her evil masters rather than face death, however, were powerful motivators to keep her from doing so, and so she never did. Sometimes, however, she wondered just how much more terrible death could be…

She was still wrapped up in her thoughts when she passed the heavy wooden door that led down into the dungeon area. She recalled when the jackal-man her masters had captured earlier was brought in, and wondered if he was still alive down there. Pausing in front of the door for a moment, Mirlana temporarily threw aside her caution and pulled it open a crack just wide enough to sneak through before closing it behind her. She always hated that part of the palace. It was cramped, dark, and forbidding, very unlike the spacious and luminous marble décor of the main floors. Quiet as a mouse, she stole along until she reached the cells. It did not take her long to find the prisoner she wondered about; he was the only one unfortunate enough to be held there at the time.

Jackalman saw her approach and lunged toward the bars in a rage. "Let me out of here!" he howled.

Startled, Mirlana stepped back, taking care to stay out of his reach as she was not sure if he would attempt to grab her. She put her finger to her lips and whispered, "I would if I was able. But it'd mean the end of me if I did." She looked the Mutant over, curious as she had never seen one of his kind before, and wondered if he was an alien that come with the tiger or the ice woman. Whatever he was, she was glad to see that he had not been maimed or injured by her masters before he had been imprisoned, as she was relatively sure that whatever crime he had committed to wind up there, it likely paled in comparison to what his jailers were guilty of. "Why are you here?" she asked him. "What did they say your crime was?"

"Spying," the indignant jackal snapped at her. "That Damien didn't like me watching him sweet-talk Chilla."

"I'm sure he didn't. He'd never want to risk anyone warning her before he was finished with her," Mirlana said darkly. "So are you a friend of hers?"

Jackalman sneered and leaned against the bars. "Chilla's friend? Not quite. But I know her. I was with her looking for that elixir, since I don't trust those Lunatacs to share it with us Mutants when we need it too." He eyed her curiously. "Are you one of them?"

"I serve them."

Jackalman's brow rose. "Willingly?"

"As willing as any good slave," she answered noncommittally.

The answer confirmed Jackalman's suspicions that she was there for reasons that were as unknown to those who had imprisoned him as they were to him, and he wondered if that meant that she could help him after all. "My name is Jackalman," he offered in an attempt to win her over. "I'm one of the Mutants of Castle Plundarr."

She blinked at him without recognition. "I'm sorry. I don't know much about what lies outside the village anymore. It's been many years since I've been on the outside. I've been kept here for a long, long time. All I know about you newcomers to the world is what makes its way here, and that's very little."

"They keep a tight leash on their slaves," Jackalman noted. "How did you wind up here? Did they capture you like this and break you?" He gestured to the cells.

"Not like this," Mirlana admitted. "I once lived in the trees as one of the warrior maidens."

Jackalman nodded, recognizing the dark hair and build typical of the tree-dwelling human female tribe that Mirlana had. However, most of the warrior maidens he had encountered were fighters at heart, and not the type to be easily subjugated. The Mutants all knew that from experience, for

more than once they had tried to do just that with the warrior maidens they had captured. It had yet to be a successful venture. He wondered if this particular woman was merely weaker than the average warrior maiden, or if Damien and Celeste had twisted her into someone almost unrecognizable as it seemed that Damien had been doing to Chilla. "So why did you come down here if they didn't send you?" he asked.

Mirlana glanced up the stairs, and then took a step closer to him, answering in a low whisper as if she feared the walls themselves could hear her. "I wondered if I could help you."

"Sure," he said, and tugged at the door. "Nyah, opening this would be a big help."

"I can't do that." She shook her head. "But I might be able to get some kind of message out to friends of yours, to someone who could free you, and help Chilla and the Thundercat before it's too late for them. Tell me who to contact and where they are, and I'll do my best."

Sneering in disbelief, Jackalman said, "It didn't look to me like Chilla or Tygra needed much help."

"They do," Mirlana asserted. "They just don't realize it yet. In fact, you're the lucky one of you three."

"Yes, I feel *real* lucky," the Mutant retorted sarcastically.

"You mentioned a Castle Plundarr," Mirlana said. "Are there more of you there? Should I try to send a message to them? Where is your castle?"

"If a human shows up at Castle Plundarr, she'll be captured on sight," he warned, assuming that she meant that she would try and run there herself, or that she would send another human like her to do it instead. "To Mutants, you're slave fodder, much like you seem to be to Damien and Celeste." He then wrinkled his muzzle, not wanting to offend the woman out of helping him. "But if you think you can find a way to get me out of here, come here and I'll tell you whatever you need to know." Relieved and more than a little bit surprised that Mirlana did just that, Jackalman went ahead and proceeded to fill her in.

Back at Cat's Lair, Lion-O, Cheetara, Panthro, and Snarf gathered in the conference room discussing Tygra's parting note. Cheetara still held the paper in her hands with a distressed look upon her face. "I feel awful about this, Lion-O. It isn't like Tygra to just run off!"

"I agree," Snarf said, pacing upon the windowsill. "Tygra would normally tell us when to expect him back, but this time he didn't. What if it means he doesn't want to, that he's run off with this, rowr, strange woman? I'm worried!"

"Come on Snarf, Tygra's a big boy," Lion-O chided gently. "He said he'd come if he saw the signal, so I don't think he's abandoned us. He probably just wanted some time alone and to get

to know this girl better without us getting involved." He frowned. "We probably did upset him more than we thought, and like Cheetara said before when she told us, he didn't want to have to explain it after we ribbed him about it."

"Even still, while falling in love can make us act silly sometimes, Tygra's generally more responsible than this," Cheetara argued. "He's not the type to run off on impulsive flights of fancy."

Panthro raised his eyebrows. "Not usually, no, but it's not like it's never happened before. Does the name 'Silky' ring any bells?"

"But that was different," Cheetara said with a shake of her mane. "Mumm-Ra disguised himself and drugged Tygra with a narcotic fruit. He was acting like an addict, not a love struck teenager." She paused, and her unsettled feeling about the situation magnified at the mention of the incident. "At least, I *hope* it was different…"

Lion-O thought for a moment. "Well, Tygra does have a bit of a weakness for things that… for things that excite his senses," he conceded. "I mean, there was also the Keystone, but it had a power of its own too. I know you two were on New Thundera at the time, but Snarf and I can both attest that it made him act in ways that I'd say were very unlike the Tygra we know so well."

Snarf let out a shudder. "Bwrrr. He was pretty out of control, wasn't he?" he said with a sigh. "Thank goodness the Sword of Omens brought him to his senses and that wretched Keystone was destroyed. That's one piece of the Treasure of Thundera I won't regret losing for an instant. It nearly did him in."

"So what are you getting at?" asked Panthro. "You think Tygra's become addicted to this Celeste woman or something she has?"

"Maybe. Pleasure can be a powerful motivator," Lion-O suggested.

Cheetara frowned. "Intoxicating fruit and energy crystals are one thing, Lion-O, but sex? Tygra is more grounded than that."

Snarf shrugged. "Well, snarf, if you think about it, what is the difference between one sensual pleasure and another? Especially if that sort of urge is one he's been denied for some time. And if you'll all remember, Tashi managed to get a hold on all of us but you, Cheetara, and I don't think I need to spell out what she was selling to our minds in her gaze, snarf snarf."

"I don't believe this," Cheetara said, shaking her head. "This isn't the time to sit in judgment on his habits. He could be in danger. What if it's not love, not sex, but some kind of power or corruptive hold that this Celeste has put on him?"

That time Lion-O sighed. "I'm not trying to be judgmental, Cheetara, I'm just trying to see all the facts. One is that Tygra can take care of himself, and as a fellow Thundercat and our friend,

we should respect his judgment and his need for space if we have no real reason to think anything's amiss. A second is that we don't have anything other than a note that, while odd, isn't a sign that he's anything other than a little upset with us and wanting some time elsewhere for a while." He glanced down at the claw shield on his hip holding the quiet Sword of Omens and resting Eye of Thundera. "The Eye hasn't warned me of any danger. Has your sixth sense?" he asked the cheetah.

"No," she admitted. "Nothing more than just a gut feeling that something's off."

"And that might be nothing more than a holdover from wanting to smooth it over with him, right?" Panthro offered, looking to Cheetara with a sympathetic look. "I felt like a heel for needling him to that point too, and I'd like to have a word with him about it. But until he comes back…"

"On the other hand," Lion-O went on, "Tygra does sometimes get a little caught up in things, and if this Celeste is using that for less than honorable purposes, we should be concerned as his friends." He stared at the Thundercat insignia on the council table, deep in thought. "But if it is something sinister she's offering and he's taking, he'll have to see it for what it is on his own before its lure will be broken. If he doesn't want to, we're going to have a hard time convincing him otherwise."

Snarf looked up at Lion-O with concern in his eyes. "Do you really think it could be something, snarf, dangerous?"

"I don't know," Lion-O admitted. "I don't really think so. I mean, if she was evil and was out to harm the Thundercats, why would she have given Tygra that elixir to cure Cheetara in the first place? And why wouldn't the Sword of Omens warn us?"

Panthro nodded. "Both good points. Maybe we should just let him be for now."

The frown on Cheetara's face etched its way deeper, but she did not press the issue further. "If you say so. I just hope we're not making a big mistake."

Luna and Amok walked into Skytomb's control room at a late hour, and the room was empty except for Alluro, who was busy tinkering with something on the console. He looked up briefly when he heard them come in, but resumed what he was doing without a word a moment later.

The Lunatac leader glanced at the view screen, which showed the quiet outline of the surrounding DarkSide landscape. "Did Chilla return yet?" she asked the psi.

"No," he answered flatly.

Luna frowned. "She's been gone a while, hasn't she?" One who did not know Luna well enough to know better might have thought her tone held a note of concern, although she certainly would have denied it regardless.

TugMug and RedEye came in a moment later, overhearing her remark as they entered. "I'm sure Chilla can take care of herself," the graviton pointed out, while RedEye let out a knowing chortle.

"Or perhaps her Damien can do it."

The screwdriver in Alluro's hands dug sharply into a crevice where he was using it as a lever rather than its intended purpose, and the metal groaned under the additional force he applied to it when he heard TugMug's amused response to the darkling's quip. "That doesn't leave Damien as being too safe, stuck alone with her!"

While TugMug, RedEye, and even Amok chortled at that, Alluro turned around and regarded them without any humor for it. "It's not that funny. What do we know about this Damien or what he is anyway? Chilla said he looks human, but that he isn't. If not, then what is he? A mage? We've dealt with *them* before, and I don't think any of us can say we're thrilled to have met Mumm-Ra."

"You thought it was funny enough before," Luna said, raising an eyebrow at the psi. "And as long as Damien is useful to us, I don't care what he is. So long as he doesn't get in our way, what does it matter?"

RedEye peered at Alluro with amusement. "If you ask me, I think someone's jealous of Chilla's new friend."

Alluro's screwdriver met the console with a loud clatter as he turned to glare at RedEye. "Don't be ridiculous." He turned back to Luna. "Aren't you at least a little suspicious of how conveniently he turned up? We've never seen nor heard of him and his great magical powers," he said, his tone mocking as he enunciated the last three words, "before today, and at the same time Chilla was with him, Jackalman disappeared." He frowned. "By the way, Slythe bored me with yet another message whining that he hasn't turned up yet. He thinks we did something to the mangy canine, and no matter what I tell that reptilian fool, he doesn't believe we're innocent."

TugMug let out a hearty laugh. "Us? Innocent?"

"All right, 'not guilty' then," Alluro amended. "But we all know that we had nothing to do with that idiot's disappearance, and I doubt Chilla bothered with him either, which means someone or something else did."

Nodding, Luna said, "Yes, but if Chilla was with Damien, that'd clear him too, unless they did it together. And why would they do that? Because he ruined the ambiance of their little wine party?" she scoffed incredulously.

“Nice attempt at an excuse to hate his guts though,” RedEye said, grinning snidely at Alluro.

Alluro’s response was to mutter something uncomplimentary about RedEye and his alleged parentage of a darkling whore and an inbred Mutant under his breath, and returned his attention to the console.

Luna meanwhile tapped her riding crop thoughtfully. “Well, Alluro may have a point. If Chilla doesn’t come back soon, it wouldn’t be a bad idea to look around and see where she ran off to.”

“Don’t you get all paranoid now,” TugMug said, bouncing over to one of the other consoles. “A stupid Mutant disappearing is one thing. They could fall into a Berbil trap and be stuck until another one of them shows up to get them out. But Chilla? I mean, who out there is meaner than a Lunatac like her, other than maybe that annoying bag of bones? And you know she didn’t go pay him a social visit.”

“Hah, well there is that,” Luna conceded. “Chilla can take care of herself.”

With that the subject was dropped, and the Lunatacs disbursed and resumed doing what they had been previously. Not surprisingly, nothing was heard from either Chilla or Jackalman for the rest of the night.

Shortly before dawn, Mirlana cracked open the door to Celeste’s suite. She saw Celeste fast asleep on the bed, almost aglow from the psychic energy she had taken from her lusty night of play with the tiger the night before. Tygra was beside her, deep asleep, his body desperately trying to rebuild the stores of energy his succubus-like lover had stolen from him. He was not aware of the sinister truth behind Celeste’s desire for him, to him it was just that the act had been intensely pleasurable—like the effects of the wine multiplied—and so thorough that it left him very tired.

Mirlana closed the door gently and slipped back into the hallway. *Good, Celeste is asleep too,* she thought. *Maybe I can get help for them now without the masters finding out*. Before peeking in on Celeste, she had come from spying into Damien’s quarters. Like his sister, he too had been fast asleep at the side of his new toy, and like Tygra, Chilla was also in a deep slumber, unaware of what her new lover was doing to her.

In Mirlana’s hands were the shoulder straps that belonged to the jackal imprisoned in the bowels of the estate. He had given them to her as a means to alert the other Mutants to what was going on. Even though she could not leave the village herself, she had an idea of how she might get the personal effect to someone that might recognize it. In her days as a Warrior Maiden she had been a scout and had learned ways to communicate with wildlife, especially birds. Those skills were rusty, but not forgotten, and she was confident that she could summon a forest creature to take the evidence of the jackal’s capture to Castle Plundarr, and it could then show his friends where he could be found and rescued, along with the others. Mirlana did not realize that the Mutants were considered evil or that Jackalman and Tygra hailed from factions enemy to one

another, and while she knew them to be of differing races, it did not occur to her question whether they would help one another. When faced with evil such as Damien and Celeste's, after all, who would not want to help save someone else caught in it?

She approached the edge of the village path leading into the forest, already able to feel her strength beginning to fade. She could not go much farther, that was for certain, so she chose to try where she was. She climbed up into some branches and let out a loud whistle that would call to the birds. None came right away, and she wondered if perhaps she had forgotten what she needed to do after all, if it *had* been too long. She tried again, and after several disappointing moments of silence, her spirits elated as a large bird swooped down from the tree canopy above and landed at her feet.

"Please, my friend, I need a favor from you," she implored the bird, which looked up at her quizzically, but unafraid. She held out the shoulder straps. "Take this to Castle Plundarr, and show them the way here so they can help their friends. Please. It's very important." The bird remained where it landed for a moment, and Mirlana added a second entreaty of "please!" which led the bird to take the straps up into its beak. It stared at her for a long moment, and then took off into the sky above.

Mirlana breathed a sigh of relief. Perhaps there was a chance for Celeste and Damien's victims after all.

Cheetara walked into the dining room of Cat's Lair and sat down, her mood still sour from the night before. The only other Thundercats up were WilyKit and WilyKat, who were already seated and eating their breakfast. Without saying anything, she poured herself some juice and helped herself to three of Snarf's Berbil berry pancakes.

"Good morning Cheetara," both of the kittens greeted her.

She gave them a wan smile. "Good morning."

WilyKit picked up on the cheetah's mood almost immediately. "What's wrong? Didn't you sleep well?"

"I've slept better," she admitted. "I'm worried about Tygra. He didn't come back last night, did he?"

"I don't think so." WilyKat shook his head. "Snarf told us what happened with him leaving and all. I hope he comes back soon."

"So do I," a sad WilyKit said. "Is he mad at us for teasing him do you think?"

"He said in his note that he wasn't," replied Cheetara, sounding a bit surer of her conviction than she actually felt. "I don't think he'd hold a grudge over that." She let out a weary breath and

looked to the kittens in confidence. "To be honest, I think that this woman Celeste has some kind of hold on him. It's like he's infatuated with her. That's not like Tygra."

"Maybe we should find him and talk to him," WilyKit suggested.

Cheetara picked at her pancakes. "Well, Lion-O's orders were that we let him be for now. I don't really like it either, but he's probably right. Tygra probably just needs space to sort through his feelings. He isn't very in touch with them sometimes."

WilyKat's eyes sparkled as he was struck with inspiration. "Lion-O didn't tell *us* not to find Tygra."

The cheetah's brow rose. "I'm not sure that's the best idea either, WilyKat."

"Aw, think about it, Cheetara," WilyKit said, a mischievous look on her face to match her brother's. "I mean if we just happen to be on our spaceboards in the unicorn forest and find him, no one could blame us if we offered an apology in person and asked him what was going on, right?"

Their blatant bending of the rule without breaking it was enough to cause Cheetara to laugh despite herself. "You two..."

Knowing with her laughter that they had won the elder Thundercat over, WilyKat grinned. "Hey we're not called 'wily' just because it sounds cool!"

"All right," Cheetara conceded with a smile, and then waved her hand at them conspiratorially. "Just remember, this conversation never happened. Lion-O, Panthro, and Snarf would *not* be happy to hear I let you go out after Tygra."

"What conversation?" WilyKit replied coyly.

"Yeah, you just told us it was okay to go out for a spaceboard ride!" WilyKat declared jovially, and shoveled the last bites of his breakfast into his mouth. "C'mon Kit, let's go!"

"Right behind you!" She stuffed the toast in her hand into her mouth with a graceless chomp, and bounded out of the room side by side with her brother.

Alluro was rudely awakened by the sensation of a leathery whack on the back of his neck, courtesy of Luna's riding crop. Grunting and rubbing his neck as he sat up, he shot a nasty glare at the lunar woman looming over him from atop Amok. He had apparently fallen asleep at the console in Skytomb's control room late in the night hours and his back and neck now ached for it. "Wake up!" Luna snapped at him impatiently, her voice even more shrill and irksome in that just-waking-up state.

“What time is it?” grumbled Alluro.

“A few hours into the day,” Luna replied tersely as she pointed her crop at him with disapproval. “Didn’t you go to bed last night?”

“No, I was working on this. I guess I fell asleep.” He stretched, and then yawned. “I think I’ll go to bed now though,” he said, and started for the doorway, until Luna swatted at him with the crop again to stop him.

“No you’re not!” she said in a tone that would accept no argument. “We’re going on a Thundrillium excavation today. The Thundercats didn’t get everything at that site, and we have to get a move on and get whatever’s left before they decide to come back. With Chilla gone, I need all the rest of you to go and get it while I hold down the fort.”

Alluro frowned. He was not in the mood for one of Luna’s schemes, especially not on so little sleep. “What makes you sure that they haven’t already gone for it, Luna?”

Luna shook her head. “No, the area is clear. It looks like they’ve got other things on their mind today. That’s why we should move now.”

“Or perhaps it’s just that Thundercats don’t get up this early either,” the psi grumbled, and then gave Luna an aggravated look. “Besides, I’m exhausted. In case you’ve forgotten, I was in a coma yesterday, and was up to all hours of the night working.”

“Being in a coma you got more sleep than the rest of us, so that’s no excuse to be lazy! You can rest when we have that Thundrillium!” the equally unimpressed Luna screeched back at him. “Be ready in five minutes, or else!”

There was no need to spell out what the “or else” meant with the growl Amok gave in tandem with Luna’s order, so Alluro just muttered a Lunar-Plundarrian curse at her under his breath and left to find something caffeinated to drink before they left. Ten minutes later he, RedEye, and TugMug were on their way to the excavation site in the Lunattacker. None of them noticed the large bird with shoulder straps in its beak that flew past them, heading directly for Castle Plundarr.