Contagion

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Prologue

"Thundercats! Please! Help us!"

I look down at the Wollo as he stops in front of me. The poor fellow looks panicked half to death and seems to be in quite a high level of distress, as well as looking exhausted from the long distance he's ran. I gently put my hands on the man's shoulders in attempt to get him to calm down as I say "It's alright. Now, take a deep breath in and out." He does as instructed, and so I continue, "We were on our way " we got your SOS signal. However, we did not hear what happened because the person who contacted us spoke in such a rush..."

The Wollo cuts me off as he quickly blurts out "We need to get back to the village as quickly as possible! Our major mine has caved in, and we don't know how many miners are trapped and injured or...or...or worse..."

"Lion-O!"

I turn around and look at Panthro as he calls my name. He starts the Thundertank up again as he says "We need to get going!"

I nod before turning my attention back to the stricken Wollo. It would be quicker to get to the village in the Thundertank " on foot could take us hours, especially with both Pumyra and Tygra's medical supplies. With the Thunderstrike out of action from a battle with the Mutants and the Lunataks early this morning and the Feliner on a mission to New Thundera, our main mode of transport is the Thundertank.

I help him into the 'Tank, and we resume our journey as the engines roar to the maximum speed. I turn to our unexpected guest as I ask "How did this all start? You have to tell us so that we can get a general idea of what it is that we have to deal with once we get there."

The look on the creatures face clearly betrays his feelings as he explains his story; "Well, it all began when we received reports from the miners that the supports and crossbeams were cracked, rotten, and infested with woodworm. We tried to tell them to get out as quickly as possible, but that plan was prematurely put out of action when some idiot decided that it would be a brilliant idea to set of some dynamite. The connection cut to static just a few seconds before we felt the shockwave on the surface. The miners are trapped anywhere between 500 and 1,500 feet below ground level, and a few of the branches have been completely cut off."

I think to myself for a moment before stating "At that low a level, there's the risk of a build-up of carbon monoxide. We'd better speed up " we ideally need to get there quicker if we want to help out."

Panthro gets my message and guns the throttle. I sit back in my seat as the forest and country fields chock-full of Berbil Fruit fly past. I cannot help but anxiously await the aftermath of the situation that we will shortly be facing. I remember seeing what was left in the wake of Grune's rampage through the Wollo village after two penniless Bolkin folk accidentally released him from his eternal tomb. I know that what we will be faced up against will not be as bad as that, yet there are obviously going to be many deaths from such a terrible freak accident.

Nobody really utters a single word as we speed over the landscape, which is understandable. I look upon the sullen faces of my friends, yet I am met with looks of determination " the determination to help.

After a short while, we come to a stop in the village, and the sight which meets my eyes is eerily reminiscent to that of something which one would only expect to read about in a horror novel. Obviously, not all of the miners are alive, and so the dead are lined up, wrapped in black body bags. It sickens me to know that so many of them are in pain or are dead, and so many more are missing. The other Thundercats immediately jump into action, helping in any way possible whilst I am left helplessly dithering near the Wollo whom we met in the forest, not knowing what to do " I am the only one here who is not doing anything.

Suddenly, I hear a pained, strangled scream as another miner is pulled from the mine. His head is wrapped in a scarlet bandage and his arm is horrifically mangled, the broken end of his bone protruding from the twisted mess of his flesh. "B...Ben...Benorco! Benorco! Ezra! Ezra is still trapped down there!"

Me and the Wollo, who I presume is Benorco, run up to the injured miner as I ask "Who's Ezra?"

Benorco anxiously looks at me as he explains "Ezra is the eldest son of our mayor. We went down to assess the situation, and he never made it back up."

I proceed to the entrance of the mine, only to discover that it is just a hole in the rock with a ladder going into it. Tygra looks up as Snarf passes him a fresh bandage. "We could really use your help down there, Lion-O. They've located the cave-in, but no one is physically strong enough to move any of the debris, and Panthro's busy fixing the comms system " you're our only hope."

I sigh. This could be very dangerous, but Thundercats always help those who are in need. "Ok. I'll do it " at least I'll be putting myself to some use."

The tiger nods before turning to Pumyra. "Pumyra, Lion-O is going to go down into the mine to try and help to free the remaining miners..."

"No he bloody well isn't! It's far too dangerous! He could trip, fall, and break something, for Jaga's sake! I won't let you send him down there, Sneeyarf! Sneeyarf! And as for the risk of there being carbon monoxide? I promised Claudus that I'd keep him safe. I won't let you send him down there is he runs the risk of him getting carbon monoxide poisoning!"

I turn to Snarf and say "Somebody has to free those trapped miners, Snarf. Everyone else is busy."

"But..."

"No buts. I'm doing this to help them." I say, and then I prepare for my descent. I pull my headset on and flip the switch, activating the comms system as I clip a torch to my belt. When I turn to my friends, I hear Cheetara call my name from behind me. I sigh slightly as she throws herself into my arms. "For Jaga's sake, Lion-O, be careful down there!"

I wrap my arms around her as I whisper in her ear. "Don't you worry, my love. I'll be fine." She steps away, tears glistening on her eyelashes as she nods. We have been dating for about 7 months now, and I love her. I love her with all my heart and one day, I would really like for her to be my mate. My wife. My life partner. I smile at her, then turn to the ladder into the hole.

As I climb down the wooden ladder, it creaks alarmingly under my weight, making me feel overly nervous. And when I reach the bottom, I look up at the other Thundercats, who give me the Thundercat salute.

"Lion-O, can you hear me?"

Tygra's voice crackles in the headset that I'm wearing. I adjust the microphone as I say "Loud and clear, Tygra. I'm entering the mines now. Connection might cut in and out once I'm lower than 500 feet."

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The smell of sulphur and smoke is overwhelmingly strong, acrid, and pungent, but I can't let it distract me from what I need to do. I take my torch from my belt and flip the switch, bathing the passageway in shades of yellow and orange. I can hear the sounds of dripping water from overhead in the seemingly endless cavern, as well as the shouts for help from below. I don't know exactly what to think about it all, but I'm brought back to my senses when a Wollo runs up to me and cries "Lion-O! Oh, thank the Gods that you're here! Come quickly! We can't move these boulders and broken timbers, and there are still some miners trapped below!"

I follow the Wollo, whose arm is bandaged. He leads me down a few more mineshafts, and within a few minutes, we're at the site of the cave-in. The destruction from the explosion doesn't surprise me, but what really worries me is the cracks that are visible in the ceiling, through which water seeps in a slow, steady flow. The smell of gunpowder is present in the air, and broken support beams litter the area. "We'd better get working quickly " I don't like the condition that the ceiling is in."

We work relentlessly and within the next 10 minutes, we've got the debris cleared. I hear a crackle over the headset before I hear Tygra's voice. "Lion-O, have you cleared the debris?"

"Yeah...it's cleared, but...but there's an awful lot of...of smoke in the air down here and it...and it stinks of sulphur."

"Make sure that you're out of there as soon as possible - I don't want you breathing too much of it in" the tiger says, his voice crackling in the headset.

"Roger that, Tygra. Lion-O out." I say, then I continue into the tunnel. The light from my torch dances over the walls as we pass, casting ghostly forms and shapes similar to teeth on the stone. A small chunk of the stuff dislodges from the ceiling and hits me on the head, but it doesn't hurt. The sooner we're out of here, the better.

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Many of the Wollos we come across are unfortunately dead, but there are survivors. I help those who are wounded to the ladder, and then I help in collecting the dead. "Lion-O," Tygra says through the headset as we begin to wrap up the search "Ezra is still missing."

"I thought that we rescued them all!" I say, then I turn to the other Wollos "You go back to the entrance and get out of here; I'll get him."

As I head back into the mine, it becomes obvious that Tygra forgot to turn off his headset, because I can hear his conversation with Pumyra;

"I know that Pumyra, but I'm even more concerned about Lion-O's life now that he's been down there for as long as he has. His health is seriously at risk because we don't know if there could be any built-up carbon monoxide down there. He's just so young. Once he's managed to find Ezra, we'll have to rush him back to the Lair to run tests for any possible carbon monoxide poisoning. If he is poisoned and it's left untreated, it could kill him. Plus, he'll have inhaled a large quantity of smoke."

"Tygra, you do realise that I can hear everything that you're saying, don't you? Besides, I'm on Ezra's trail and I think I've found him. I'll be back up once I've freed him. Lion-O out."

I turn my torch to the pile of rocks in the corner of the cavern. I can see a hand sticking out of the debris, and when I check to find a pulse, the hand tightly grips my wrist, making me jump.

I start to slowly but carefully remove the debris, and in a few minutes, I reveal the missing Wollo. "Ezra? Ezra, can you hear me?"

"How...How do you know my name? Who are you?"

"It's me, Lion-O, the Lord of the Thundercats. Your Father sent me down here to get you." I say as I carefully pick him up and start to make my way back towards the ladder, but a deep rumbling explosion stops me in my tracks, causing me to fall to the floor as it seems to have come from within the Earth itself.

"Tygra, did you hear that?"

No answer.

"Tygra! Did you hear that, Tygra?"

"Ty...a...recie...ou...nd...lear...ion-O. Ye...we he...at expl...and fel...ockwa...fr...ere. Ge...ut...ther...ow!"

The crackling disturbance over the intercom makes me feel nervous. "Check your comms system, Tygra! I can't hear you properly!" I shout as the ground below me begins to shake violently whilst I get to my feet. The tiger's response is simple;

"GET OUT OF THERE!"

I can hear the roaring of water from behind me, but that's not possible...is it? The Sword of Omens roars in warning, then I'm struck from behind by a powerful surge of frigid water, barely giving me enough time to scream as I'm swept clean off my feet and dragged under. The torrent of blackness sweeps me along, leaving me too stunned to even scream. It seeps down my nose and into my throat, triggering the reflex to breathe in, meaning that I begin to choke.

I struggle to surface, but it's no good " it's too powerful and is moving far too quickly and is far too strong. I know that if I can't get up for air I could drown, but I'm helpless to act " I'm too weak. As my body is cruelly dragged along the floor, jagged daggers of rock and wood scrape against my back and abdomen, cutting me.

For mere seconds, I'm pushed to the surface. I grab hold of a stalactite and pull myself up. I desperately gasp for air and cough, still clutching hold of Ezra. I pull him up so that he can breathe, but a rock smashes into my hand, making me roar in pain and let go of the stalactite. And yet again, I'm dragged back under. However, this time, my shirt snags on a support beam, and I can't free myself. It's getting harder to stay conscious, and my limbs feel like lead weights, and the blackness is creeping into the corners of my vision...

"Lion-O! Lion-O, come on!"

"Lion-O, for Jaga's sake, WAKE UP!"

I grow aware of voices shouting my name, and I'm vaguely aware of someone's lips pressed against mine as air is forced into my lungs, as well as my chest being forced down. My eyes fly open, and I see a blur of orange, black and white above me. I choke, spraying water everywhere as I weakly croak "Wha...What the hell, Tygra?"

"You nearly drowned and your heart stopped beating. We had to perform CPR or you'd have died." the tiger says as he helps me to sit up and wraps two thick blankets around my shoulders. Snarf purrs then says "Sneeyarf Sneeyarf! Reow, I told you it was a bad idea to let him go down there! He could have drowned!"

Cheetara sits down next to me, wrapped in blankets too, and hugs me, my soaked mane resting on her shoulder. "Oh my God, Lion-O, I was so worried! I thought that you were a gonner!" she cries, and I notice that she's drenched too. She sees me looking and says "I dived in once the mine flooded and dragged you and Ezra out. Ezra's fine."

I look round at my friends and see how relieved they all look. Once everything is sorted out and the mine entrance has been filled in and covered, we get into the Thundertank and return home to the Lair.