ThunderCats

Bio-Booster Armor Guyver

One Last War to Fight

Episode Twenty: Rise and Fall, Rage and Grace

By Knight Writer

"Bengali, you probably saved his life." Pumyra rested against him as the moon rose higher beyond their window. "Now," she began playfully, lightly running her fingers over his torso, "who taught you to bandage someone like that?"

"Let's just say you don't hold a monopoly on the whole bandage thing." Pumyra kissed him at the corner of his jaw, which she knew would drive him crazy. His tightening arm across her back was her reward. The expertly-applied gauze had staunched the flow of blood from Sho's wound enough that she wouldn't have needed to risk using separated Thunderian plasma to replace what he'd lost. Humans - and this baffled Pumyra to no end - had an aversion to surgical techniques and anything involving the transfusion of blood. The other intelligent races of Third Earth, save Berbils who had no blood or organic tissue, were leery of such things as well yet not to the extent of humans. The Warrior Maidens forbade it outright, even.

"I see I taught you well," Pumyra said as her desires mounted. It had been awhile for the two of them, given the care that Lion-O had needed.

"I learned from the best."

"It's amazing what that Bengal charm will get you," Pumyra replied, engaging his lips fully.

"You're amazing no matter what," Bengali said after taking a few breaths. From there on, niether had breath for words.

Cheetara looked up at the ceiling, lying restlessly in the bed she and Lion-O had shared only once. She could still detect his scent in the sheets, in the air, and she let it lead her mind to wandering. Memories of him over their time on Third Earth replayed themselves, showing Lion-O in moments of cockiness, of petulance, and of him becoming the man he now was and the king he would one day be. He was truly a man, now, in mind as well as in body. True, he lacked experience in some areas both regal and emotional, but he showed no sign of backsliding into the prince he used to be. For the first time since emerging from the suspension capsule and finding his had so catastrophically malfunctioned, she had complete faith that he would lead them into a new era on this world. The Annointment Trials had changed him so much, and this newest battle ever so much more, she'd had no reservations about giving herself to him. None at all.

She was somewhat surprised to see that her mind wasn't the only thing wandering as she felt her hand kneading a breast. Cheetara smiled gently, letting her mind and her body follow their path to release. One more time like this, then.

==========

"Owwww..."

"Feeling okay?" asked the friendly voice to his right. Sho opened his eyes to the reduced lighting of the infirmary with his head feeling ready to explode and limbs like limp noodles.

"Lion-O?"

"That's right. Looks like we're bunkmates for awhile."

"How... how did I get here?" Sho tried to rise, and his senses informed him by way of the world spinning violently that getting out of bed was not advisable.

"Cheetara and Pumyra brought you here after the mine collapsed," Lion-O said in reply as the room slowed its rotation. "You took a nasty shot to the head."

"Feels like I just went ten rounds with the ThunderTank. And lost."

"More like tons of rock and dirt," Lion-O said. "Pumyra said you have a bad concussion, and the gash in your head required stitching."

"Nothing else wrong?"

"Well, she'd been worried that your brain had swollen and that you'd lost too much blood. The first wasn't the case and Bengali's bandaging your head prevented the second."

"Looks like I owe you guys my life."

"Don't worry about it. Things are pretty much give-and-take around here."

"Heh... oww... Gotta get out of this bed."

"Nature calling?"

"Gonna... call the Guyver..."

"Uh-huh," Lion-O said, cutting him off. "And you can be the one to explain to Pumyra why you annihilated half of her infirmary to get rid of a headache."

"Kinda... planning to go outside first."

"Then you can explain why you left here against her orders."

"Y'mean she can even boss you around?" Sho asked in disbelief.

"If it's for a medical reason, you bet."

"She really that strict?"

"Pumyra only wants to make sure her patients, us in this case, have all the time we need to heal."

"She's a good doctor, then."

"But," Lion-O began in a conspiritorial tone, "just between you and me? I think she's enjoying the hell out of it."

"Perish the thought," Sho deadpanned, and both chuckled. "I'd turn to look at you, but..."

"I understand."

"Good morning, you two," Pumyra's voice chimed from the other side of the privacy screens before she stepped between them. Tygra followed behind, both ThunderCats bearing sets of bandages.

"Up a little early, aren't you?" Lion-O asked. "It's barely first light yet."

"There's a lot to do today, and I wanted to get the both of you rebandaged first thing."

"Bet I look like crap," Sho said as Tygra's face came into his view.

"You've looked better," he replied, sitting beside Sho and reaching to unwrap the dressing on his head.

"Does the wound still itch?" Pumyra asked as she exposed the pinkish, puckered flesh where Grune's knife had entered.

"Like you wouldn't believe."

"Well, I can tell you haven't been scratching it. That's good."

"The Lord of the ThunderCats," Lion-O said with mock machismo, "must have a will of tempered steel."

"I'll just bet," Pumyra replied as she spread the disinfectant balm. "Sho how are you feeling?"

"Let's just stick with alive. Pumyra, thank you for..."

"There's no need to thank me," she replied while she re-dressed Lion-O's wound and Tygra finished with Sho's head. "I'm a healer and a ThunderCat. It's what I do, though I'll give your gratitude to Bengali."

"Lion-O told me. I'd appreciate that."

"Even so," she said, eyeing Lion-O sharply, "I am not 'enjoying the hell out of it'."

"You... heard that..."

"Yes." Pumyra held up her left hand, thumb and forefinger an inch apart. "I'm only enjoying it a little." Laughter filled the small infirmary as the first official rays of the sun reached in through the open window. "And," she said, looking over to Sho, "you wouldn't have liked having to explain destroying half of my infirmary."

"Point taken, Ma'am."

"I'll be back later to check on you two. Don't get into any trouble while I'm gone."

"I think we can manage that," Lion-O replied as the other ThunderCats took their leave.

==========

Grune fingered the hilt of the club at his waist, gazing out in utter boredom at the slowly rising arcology of what the Mutants had dubbed Fortress Plun-Darr. The lower levels of that particular example of Mutant architecture were under construction, dungeons hewn into the caverns beneath and storage for vehicles established within the eastern side. Mutant quarters had been established on the opposite, sparsely furnished and reeking of unbathed brutes, in order to free up space within the starships. The foundation rose several dozen feet, reinforced by arm-like protrusions which ended in grasping stone talons.

He yawned, stretching his muscular form in the growing light of day. The prospect of leading these idiots had become all too tedious over the weeks, so much so that he even took no joy in yelling at them. He still found ample reason to, of course, but Grune just went through the motions. Ever since Lisker had beaten down that Simian, none of the Mutants had much bothered with lobbing insults their way.

Grune had to admit, if only to himself, that he couldn't help but feel a certain respect for that human. Fearless, utterly ruthless, the Thunderian saw a lot of himself in that one. Lisker excercised with grim determination, preparing himself for another battle with Guyver One. However, and Grune found this in turn perplexing and somewhat humorous, Lisker never raised a hand to any of the slaves. In fact, after he prevented that monkey from whipping the Wollo, none of the Mutants would raise a whip while in his presence. In fact, Lisker seemed to find excuses to be within sight of them which irritated the Mutants to no end. Particularly, and Grune resisted every urge to rib Lisker about it, that one female Wollo.

"You do realize," Grune had said to him one night a few days previous, "that the Wollo woman you're watching over *is* a slave?"

"Hmph, as though the chains she's wearing aren't a giveaway," Lisker had replied. "What's your point?"

"If you want to have her, you only need to take her." The glare Lisker had shot him then, if the old adage were true, would have knocked Grune dead on the spot. Again.

Oswald Lisker stared at the bent forms of the slaves as they toiled beneath the glaring sun with mixed feelings of pity and anger. His gaze fell once again upon the Wollo woman, whose name he had learned was Maria, as she helped another of her breed shove a cart of stone along its tracks. Her dress and blouse were utterly ruined, exposing lengths of her body which only her natural thin coat of fur concealed. He noticed that she moved more easily than in days prior, as had all the enslaved people in this hellpit. He could not help but take some pride in the thought the he helped make that possible.

In truth, though from parents to high school and college councilors to everyone who ever held authority over him even in Kronos, he found slavery abhorrent. True, he had met women who had been excited at the mention of chains and pain, yet the thought of such utter submission always repulsed him. Such notions appealed to a darker side of him he always kept repressed, which he would only release in a very limited fashion. The thoughts of what he had once been planning for Cheetara, in fact, sickened him to his stomach. Such had always been a problem for him, resorting to such sadomasochistic fantasies when beaten.

Enough of this tightrope shit, he thought as he eyed a Jackal fingering the whip at his side. The Mutant's eyes locked with his own for a moment before the hand fell away from the length of leather.

Good, he thought as he resumed his vigil over the bound ones. Yet again, Lisker found himself thinking of how he could eradicate this enterprise, yet held himself in check. He did not know what Mumm-Ra was truly capable of. Besides, he knew Sho would come here sooner or later.

His eyes lingered on the now-retreating form of Maria as she and the other Wollo shoved the cart back into the depths. Lisker applied his trained mind to the variables of this mad equation. Sho would come. The ThunderCats would as well. With reinforcements, if they were smart. Lisker could not help but think that Sho's next move would prove crucial for so many factions. He only hoped Sho would make the right one. He considered using the telepathic link he shared with Guyver One, and decided against it. So much the better if he deduced the right move on his own.

==========

Myrlha awoke feeling full and rested. Such was so alien an experience that it took a moment for her to adjust to it despite the days she and Salvador had spent on the road. She searched her pack for a sample of vegetables and withdrew a hand that was sorely lacking.

"I hate to break this to you, Salvador," she began as she held out the meager selection, "but..."

"I know," the Wollo replied. "I was able to find other edible berries not long ago."

"I just wish food was easier to come by for you," Myrlha offered lamey, and not for the first time.

"I can't help that we Wollos are herbivores," Salvador answered with one of his soft chuckles which she had come to admire. "It's the way we are."

"Can't you at least try some meat?" she asked, rising to her feet and stretching her frame amid the fragrant shrubs. "I can hunt some for you, no problem."

"It's not a question of preference," Salvador explained. "We Wollos simply can't eat flesh. At best, we sick it up as soon as we get it down."

"Then don't bother with a worst-case. Salvador," Myrlha began, turning to face her diminutive new friend, "It's not right for me to eat when you can't." The Wollo chuckled at that, puzzling her greatly. "What's so funny?" Myrlha asked, her head cocked in bewilderment.

"Ever since the ThunderCats won our trust," he began, "I wondered if other Thunderians behaved the same way they do."

"Meaning....?"
"You're a lot like them, Myrlha. And yes, that *is* a compliment."

"... Thank you," Myrlha managed, a blush coloring her cheeks. "But..."

"We should get going," Salvador said quickly on seeing the embarrassment he'd caused her. "Daylight's wasting, and we still have far to go."

"Y... yes. Let's go."

==========

I had no idea, Lion-O thought as he looked at his hand, that this game was so ancient. And so much fun, too! His gaze shifted to Sho, who was now sitting upright, and tried to find any indicator of what the young human held. Pumyra had proclaimed this day as their last in the infirmary, a fact for which both were profoundly grateful, and the two were spending it any way they could. For his part, Lion-O thought back briefly to the group of Wollos and Bolkins who had taught the ThunderCats this game of skill and cunning. For the life of him, however, he could not determine why it was called "poker". No one was getting poked, for Jaga's sake!

"I'll take two," Sho said, placing cards on the table between their beds. Lion-O dealt them accordingly and saw Sho's left eye twitch slightly at his new hand.

"One," Lion-O said, dealing his new card and barely hiding a grin. Ironically enough, WilyKit and WilyKat were the absolute best among the ThunderCats at poker, which explained why the two were able to duck so many chores after a weekly round.

"Thirty Thunderian dollars," Sho said, indicating the imaginary ante. Thunderian currency had no real worth on Third Earth, gold and gemstones being the primary trade fodder along with livestock and foodstuffs for barter.

"I'll see that, and raise you ten more." Lion-O rearranged the cards in his hand, looking down at the red and white chips Snarf had provided along with the cards. "If we were on Thundera, you'd be down to your shirt right now."

"I'm practically there now," Sho replied, gazing at his cards before setting them down. "Call. Three of a kind, ace high."

"Royal flush."

"Damn..." Sho shook his head as Lion-O collected the notional winnings. "Good thing we're not playing strip poker. I'd have lost more than my shirt."

"No offense, but I'd rather not see you naked."

"Same here," Sho replied with a sly grin. "But I think I know who you *would* play with."

"You've seen why," Lion-O retorted, smirking. "Can you blame me?" He laughed out loud at Sho's furious blush. Teasing him about seeing Cheetara in the buff was almost as much fun as sharking him at cards.

"When am I gonna live that down?" Sho asked in exasperation.

"Not any time soon, kid," Lion-O said as he shuffled the cards, showing off the dexterity of his recently healed arm. He again silently blessed Pumyra's medical knowledge which allowed his limb to mend so quickly. "Another hand?"

"What's the damage so far?"

"Around two thousand Thunderian."

"Gimme a shovel, then. Deal."

"Digging the hole deeper?"

"Might as well." Lion-O dealt the five cards. "Shimatta..." Sho muttered when he saw his hand.

"What?" Sho had been slipping into that strange stacatto language at odd moments the entire day.

"Never mind," he said. "It's not really worth translating."

"Sounded like a curse to me."

"Pretty much. Three."

"Is there a word for ThunderCats in your language?" Lion-O asked idly.

"Ummm... gimme a second here... I guess the best translation would be Kazuchi no Neko."

"Kazu... run that by me again?" Lion-O took two cards and managed not to grimace. "Ten, by the way."

"I'll see that," Sho replied. "Kazuchi no Neko."

"Kazuchi no Neko?"

"That's it. Raise you five."

"How is that ThunderCats?"

"Well, kazuchi is the word for thunder. Neko is the word for cat."

"What's the no for?"

"It conjugates the two words. Literally, it means 'Cats of Thunder'."

"Oh," Lion-O replied. "Where did you learn to speak Standard?"

"You mean English?"

"If that's what you call it. See your five, raise for ten."

"Done," Sho said as he put what remained of his meager pile of chips between them with a pained look. "I really don't remember. Seems I learned it pretty well."

"Good thing. Not many around here speak the other language. What do you call it?"

"Nihongo. Japanese, to put it in Standard. Call."

"Two pair, king high."

"How about that? Straight flush, high cards."

"And he makes a comeback," Lion-O chuckled as he processed what Sho had told him. "Feel like pressing your luck?"

"Fortune favors the bold. Deal 'em." Sho's face was neutral this time. Good hand or poker face? Lion-O asked himself. "Anything wild?"

"Deuces and suicide kings," he replied, meaning the two king cards which looked to be stabbing themselves in the head with their swords. Three fives, two of hearts and a ten of clubs graced his hand. Four of a kind, given what was wild.

"Pumyra's taken the day off, huh?"

"By *my* order," Lion-O said, discarding the ten and drawing a five. "She was only too happy to let Tygra take over. She's been running herself into the ground over the two of us."

"She deserves some downtime. Betting five."

"See that, and raise you ten."

"Done," Sho replied as he tossed some chips into the pot.

"Kazuchi no Neko, huh. Wait, why are the words reversed?"

"Japanese is spoken differently from Standard. It's kinda tough to explain."

"What's tough to explain?" Tygra's voice sounded from the entrance as he came into view with Snarf trailing with a tray of sandwiches and a pitcher of juice.

"The differences between Sho's native language and Standard," Lion-O explained.

"I wouldn't mind learning some of it."

"I'll teach you some. Soon as I'm out of the infirmary, anyway."

"I'll clear some of my schedule," Tygra replied as he rolled a spare table next to the one they had commandeered for their game. "Who's winning?"

"Him," Sho said, jerking a thumb at Lion-O. "If we were playing for money, I'd be working for him right now."

"You think he's tough, play WilyKit and WilyKat sometime, shnarf," Snarf said as he placed the tray on the table. "They're *brutal*, shnarf snyearf."

"I'll pass, Snarf. Twenty, Lion-O."

"I'll see your twenty and raise ten more."

"High stakes," Tygra mentioned with a grin as the chips clinked into the center of the table. "Do you mind if I stick around to see how this plays?"

"I'll deal you in on the next hand, if you want," Lion-O said as he studied Sho's inscrutable expression.

"I have an hour or so free. I think I'll take you up on that."

"Don't forget about me," Snarf intoned. "I haven't played in forever. Can't let my skills get rusty, snarf shnarf."

"Sure thing. Twenty, Sho."

"See that, and raise you twenty more."

He hasn't drawn, Lion-O thought as more chips piled between them. What kind of hand does he have, anyway?

"Getting a little pricey, here," Sho said in a neutral tone.

"You can fold any time."

"So can you."

"I don't have to."

"Or you're afraid to."

"Oooooo..." Snarf muttered.

"If you're gonna get cocky, I'll bet forty."

"Forget that. All in." Lion-O nearly balked as they slid their chips into the center of the table.

"Know what? Call. Four of a kind," Lion-O said triumphantly as he laid his hand on the table.

"Full house," Sho replied as he laid down his cards. "And now you're broke."

"I..." Lion-O was speechless as Sho raked in the winnings accompanied by racuous laughter from Tygra and Snarf.

"Lady Luck is fickle, Lion-O," Tygra said while Sho stacked his chips with a smile. "Keep that well in mind."

"Well, if everyone's game, we can start over," Sho said with a bright smile.

"This time, Snarf deals," Lion-O said with a chuckle.

==========

Pumyra stretched as she entered the clearing in the dense jungle canopy, inhaling the sweet fragrance of fresh water which came in waves from the crystal clear pool which rested in the center surrounded by tall, craggy rocks. She had found this place not long after being named a ThunderCat, just when Tygra had been drafting plans for the Tower of Omens. She had brought Bengali here only once, and the love they'd made was still on her top ten list of times the two of them had enjoyed each other. Those memories, in fact, were playing in the theatre of her mind as she neared the edge of the pool. She banished them with little difficulty, focusing instead on why she had come today. This place was mostly hers, where she came to relax and let the troubles of life slide off her shoulders for a brief while.

She paused on reaching the pool's edge, listening again for the tell-tale whine of WilyKit and WilyKat's spaceboards within the myriad of trees. She had heard them on her trek through the well-concealed path to the spring, yet only briefly as the kittens raced off on whatever game they were playing. Jungle wildlife was the only sound which greeted her ears. Besides, other than Bengali, she had told no one of this place. She'd even told Panthro she was going on a stroll when he had dropped her off at the jungle's edge in the ThunderTank.

Just relax, she told herself as she removed her boots, then the sling which also served as her belt and ammo bandolier. Even if the others know about this place, you'll hear them coming with plenty of time to spare. With a relaxed sigh, Pumyra doffed the short skirt/tunic she wore as her uniform and let the sun shine down on her lithe form with utter joy. Even though the middle- and working-classes of Thunderian society had worn clothes, she had always felt truly free when completely naked. After a moment of ultimate sunbathing, Pumrya dove headfirst into the cold water and surfaced several feet away from the shoreline in the pool's deep center. she gaze down, amazed at how clear the water was as she beheld the rippled and distorted image of herself below the water and the deceptively close bottom. All that time stranded on an island in the middle of one of Third Earth's oceans, and the only source of fresh water had been too small to use for bathing in such a manner. She had forgotten just how good the cold water felt against her naked flesh. Pumyra dove again, swimming down until she felt her lungs would burst before reversing direction and breaking the surface again with a great gasp of air.

Oh, yes, she thought relaxing her body and allowing herself to float freely upon the surface. It's been *way* too long since the last time I did this. Pumyra remained exposed and rested on the surface of the water, uncaring about the troubles of the world, even as a strange feeling began to overcome her. Said sensation began to gnaw at her more and more with each passing moment until she opened her eyes again in growing concern.

I'm being watched, Pumyra thought as she sank back to shoulder depth. I'm certain of it. More than a little alarmed, she whipped her head about in an attempt to find evidence of someone spying on her. Unconsciously, she covered her nakedness beneath the surface of the water as she gazed about. Reason began to reassert itself as she took stock of the current situation.

I haven't heard any engines, she thought as she tread water. I don't even know if someone's spying on me. If so, who would it be? The answer came to her in moments, leaving her with an embarrassed blush coloring her face.

He *is* at that age, she thought.

"I know you're there, WilyKat," she said loudly. Pumyra continued to tread water as she searched the landscape with her eyes. "Trust me, I know when I'm being watched." Silence was her only reply. Trying to hide, was he? Fine. Pumyra kept quiet, her embarrassment growing into unease as the minutes ticked by.

"WilyKat?!" Pumyra called into the wilderness. "Come on, stop this foolishness." Even more silence was her reply. "Kat, listen, I know that curiosity regarding females is a natural thing. I know you're experiencing that." The forest was utterly silent at this point, sending waves of actual fear through Pumyra. "WilyKat?" Her only reply was a flock of birds taking wing from the trees. Pumyra paddled back to the stretch of shoreline on which her tunic and boots rested, feeling self-conscious and more than a little annoyed.

"Listen up, Kat!" she boomed, moving from flattered to annoyed to royally pissed off. "You've gotten enough of a look! Come out now, and own up! Trust me, I'll forget this little incident. I won't even tell Panthro!" She hated using the eldest ThunderCat's name and reputation, but she had also seen that there was nothing better to make WilyKat andWilyKit snap to than the threat of dealing with Panthro. Silence was her only reply as the water grew colder and another, more ominous, notion came to her.

What if it wasn't WilyKat who was spying on her?

Pumyra climbed out of the pool into the shade of one of the circling stones before hurriedly donning her clothes. Bandits were getting bolder now that the ThunderCats were in less of a position to deal with them, and this section of jungle had once been the territory of a notorious group of raiders. One thing Pumyra knew about people like that, regardless of species, is that they hunted in packs.

The kittens might be in danger, she thought as she re-armed herself. I'd better... the hell was that? She spun in alarm at the sound of low undergrowth rustling to her left. "There you are!" she exclaimed, pouncing into the thick grasses to discover only emptiness.

Pumyra forced herself to remain calm, to breathe deeply and slowly. She was in a jungle teeming with wildlife, after all. Maybe it was nothing more than a wild boar feasting its eyes on her in the raw. She told herself that until she saw the scrap of orange fabric which dangled from the ruins of a spider's web and the unmistakeable stain of crimson which was still moist.

That's his blood, alright, she thought as the coppery scent reached her nose. Frantically, she cast her gaze about until she spotted the trampled grasses and wildflowers leading deeper into the wood. Something's not right, here...

Even if he had been... satisfying his curiosity... and something had jumped him, why hadn't WilyKat cried out? And where was his sister? Pumyra started down the trail left by his supposed abductor, seeing no other options available. Cautios steps quickened into an anxious trot then a full sprint as images of WilyKat's possible injuries crossed her mind's eye. Unmindful of the

level of noise she was making by charging through the brush, Pumyra soon found herself in a small open area of the jungle. Breath came in gasps as the thick heat of the day made the air a syrupy, hazy morass.

"WilyKat?" she called, absently swatting a mosquito which had begun making a meal of her. "Wily... Kat?" the feel of the droplets hitting her cheek stopped her cold, her fingers coming away from her face streaked in red. Heart thundering, fear playing her nerves like an insane violinist, she gazed upward.

The startled cry which burst from her lips at the sight of him echoed back to her from the surrounding trees. Suspended upside-down by a gnarled tangle of thick vines, WilyKat hung in the air between several trees. Slowly, he turned his face to her and opened his eyes at another shout of his name.

"Pumyra..."

"Hold on! I'll..."

"RUN!!! GET OUTTA HERE NOOOOW!!!" The utter horror in his scream rooted her in place for one fateful second just before the vine speared from the treeline and coiled itself about her throat. Gagging and struggling, her struggles were in vain as still more growths snaked about her wrists, her legs, her torso and arms while the first slackened barely enough for Pumyra to take in a gurgling breath. She couldn't manage to yelp in outraged surprise when a length of vegetation slapped hard across her rear and snatched free her sling.

"See, kid?" a deep voice that seemed to come from everywhere at once asked as a mass of roiling dirt rose before Pumyra and took the shape of a man. Blades of grass stuck out from it at odd angles with stones and grub worms tumbling down its surface. "I said you wouldn't be lonely long."

"Ghaaakk... Dyme..." Pumyra managed as the vine about her throat slackened a little more.

"Smart *and* sexy?" the strange creature replied with what might have been arousal. Pumyra did not wish to find out. "You cat people really have the whole package, dontcha?"

"Let him go," Pumyra snarled. From the attack which had robbed her of her weapon, she had a reliable indicator of where this would end up. I'll be damned, she thought, if I let WilyKat see something like that. "You've got me."

"And just what," Dyme began as he... it?... slid closer as though the earth itself were merely an extension of its will, "would persuade me to do that?"

"Pumyra..."

She forced WilyKat's plea out of her consciousness.

"Well?" Dyme said languidly.

"I told you," she began, hating herself for having to resort to something like this and reminding herself that any humiliation would be worth saving WilyKat's life. Or, at least, sparing him from the utter evil of what was about to take place. "You. Have. Me."

WilyKat stared down at the two of them, realization coming to him like the front grille of the ThunderTank at full speed. Adrenaline shot into his blood with a blazing rush of sanguine rage at what was taking place.

"DON'T YOU TOUCH HER, YOU DAMN FREAK!! YA HEAR ME?! DON'T YOU... DON'T YOU FUCKING *TOUCH* HER!!!!" An agonized screech followed his epithet as the vines squeezed with tremendous force.

"You're in no position to be making demands here, little man," Dyme replied as the world faded from gray to black.

"Don't you... ghaakkhgg..."

"He's still alive," Dyme said as the length of cord throttled her once more until black spots danced across her vision. "Now, say it." The vine released its grip completely and Pumyra gave in to a fit of hacking coughs before she could form the words. Finally;

"Do what... you want to me. I don't care, I won't resist. Just, for Jaga's sake, let WilyKat go." Burning shame welled up inside, barely tempered by the fact that it was for the young man's sake.

"I can't believe what a whore you are," Dyme chuckled in reply. "You'd really give it up trying to save him?"

"He's my friend," Pumyra replied, defiant despite the crushing humiliation inside. "Besides, it's obvious that you're going to violate me no matter what. If it means his life, I'll bear that shame." Tears stung the corners of her eyes, spilling down her face to leave trails of despair and rage. And, somewhat to her own surprise, more than a dash of pure unbridled hatred.

"You feel nice," Dyme said and Pumyra steeled herself for the rape. "But, I don't go that way. Never was one for forcing things, ya know?"

"Wha..."

"But, I was enjoying your little performance so much, I couldn't bring myself to stop it." A blow to the stomach doubled her over as far as the entangling vines allowed as the earth beneath began to rapidly suck her down.

Dyme shook his head as he lowered first the woman, then the kid, into himself. He had to admit, that cat woman offering herself to him had to have taken some serious guts. He hadn't really

meant to play grab-ass when disarming her. That, he mused, had to be why she thought rape was on the agenda.

At least, Dyme thought as he sank back into the earth and made for the rendevouz point, not on *my* agenda. Can't vouch for Grune, though.

==========

WilyKit crouched on her Spaceboard, listening for any other sounds like the shriek she'd just heard. It had been distant, and several minutes had passed since she'd last heard the screaming voice of her brother, but she couldn't shake the horrible feeling that he was in terrible danger.

"WilyKat!" she cried out yet again. "Where'd ya go? WilyKat?!" She floated on in silence, anxiety becoming full fear, until she saw the shape protruding from the deep grass. Alert, WilyKit slowed her spaceboard only to find the broken remains or her brother's board lying on the ground amid some splatters of blood.

"Oh, Jaga," she breathed, fishing out her communicator. "Tower, come in. This is WilyKit. Please respond! Urgent!"

"Lynx-O, responding," he said, "What is the nature of the problem, WilyKit?"

"I just found WilyKat's board," her frightened voice returned. "It's all smashed up, and there's some blood here!"

"Where is he?"

"I don't know! I've been looking for him for an hour, now!"

"Pumyra is in the area," Lynx-O said, outwardly calm yet inwardly disturbed. "I shall contact her."

"Thanks! Tell her to hurry!"

"Pumyra, come in." Silence. "Pumyra, please respond." Static without voice. "Pumyra, are you receiving?" Still nothing. Immediately concerned, Lynx-O switched frequencies. "Panthro, come in!"

"Panthro, here. What's wrong?"

"I have just received word from WilyKit. Her brother's spaceboard is damaged, and he is missing. Pumyra is also in the area, however I cannot contact her. I shall relay WilyKit's coordinates directly to you."

"Got it. I'm not too far away. Panthro out."

"WilyKit."

"Yeah?"

"I cannot raise Pumyra on her commlink. Panthro is on his way to you. Keep still and alert."

"Got it." The fear in her voice was palpable, and only Lynx-O's iron resolve kept his own feelings from responding.

"Tygra, come in."

"Go ahead," Tygra replied on activating the circuit in the hilt of his bolo whip.

"WilyKit has informed me that WilyKat is missing and injured. Pumyra is in the same area, though I cannot contact her. Panthro is on his way there now."

"Understood. Tygra out." Tygra rose from his seat, setting his hand down on the table. "Looks like the game's on hold for now."

"Time to go to work," Lion-O replied, rising from his bed.

"Lion-O, are you certain you're up to this?"

"I've got two missing ThunderCats, one definitely injured, and another in the thick of it all. If there's a better time for me to get back in the saddle, I can't think of it."

"I agree," Tygra replied with as much of a smile as he could manage as he handed the claw and the Sword of Omens back to their rightful weilder. "Snarf's prepared some clothing for you."

"I was gonna show it to you after this hand, shnarrf," the diminutive ThunderCat said, "but there's no time like the present."

"I'll get dressed, too," Sho added. "I've been here long enough."

"We'll meet you in the hangar," Lion-O said. With that, Tygra departed the infirmary with steps both lighter and heavier than they had been in weeks.

==========

"This had better be good, Mumm-Ra," Luna screeched from her perch on Amok's back, the crop in her left hand smacking the palm in her right. The ancient mage looked upon the assembled Lunattaks, and the looming arcology of SkyTomb behind them, with disdain.

"It shall be, Luna, rest assured." The problem, which he would never admit, was that even he did not know why the Ancient Spirits of Evil bade him summon them here. He had only his faith in their dark and evil ways that this would prove fruitful. Luna's threat, he knew, was empty. He

had sealed them once before, and if they proved too rancorous, he would outright destroy them. Luna's bunch knew not to fuck with his power.

"I still don't see why *I* have to be here," Grune grumbled from Mumm-Ra's right.

"You do because I command it." Mumm-Ra did not deign to admit that it was also because the Ancient Ones demanded it as well. As such, the gathered commanders of evil on Third Earth were baking in the sun in one of the more arid regions of Darkside.

"This is *so* uncomfortable."

"Quit your griping, Chilla," TugMug replied.

"You want me to cool you off permanently?!"

"Enough!" Mumm-Ra shouted. Whatever his masters had in store, he hoped it would become apparent soon. He was not disappointed. The dust just before them began to whirl about, revealing a humanoid canine. His build was tightly muscled, a short tunic covering his pelvis while an ancient egyptian crown adorned his head. Golden gauntlets adorned the gray skin of his wrists, with sandals adorning his clawed feet. The head was canine in structure, grinning with a lunatic gleam in the eyes.

"Welcome," it said, smiling ferociousy, "and let me have the honor of inviting all of you to the show of the century."

"And you are...?" Luna asked.

"I have a new name, but for now you can call me Ma-Mutt."

"Ma-Mutt?" Mumm-Ra asked, perplexed.

"I got something of an upgrade from the Ancients," he replied with a hideous chuckle. "Anyway, all of you are here at the behest of the Ancient Spirits of Evil."

"And why is that?" Grune asked, irratible as ever.

"To partake," Ma-Mutt began as he started pacing, "in the greatest show this planet has ever seen. A show that would make Shakespeare himself envious."

"Who the hell is Shakespeare?" Alluro asked Red-Eye.

"Got me."

"This show," the demon formerly known as Ma-Mutt explained, "is titled simply, 'The Death of the Guyver'. Starring myself, of course."

"Care to explain this?" Grune asked, more than a little annoyed.

"Gladly," the demon explained. "The threat itself would draw out Guyver One."

"And how," TugMug began, "Would we draw him out without killing ourselves off?"

"Or survive another tussle with him *and* the ThunderCats?" Chilla added.

"Allow me to explain," Ma-Mutt replied in a tone that could almost be mistaken as gracious. "I, along with my associate who has yet to arrive, shall do battle with the Guyver. None of you shall face him." His left eye began to twitch in annoyance at the tide of laughter which washed over him.

"Y... YOU?!" Luna shrieked once she caught her breath. "I hate to tell you, but a scrawny little punk like you can't freakin' HOPE to take on that monster!"

"And *I* am loathe to inform YOU," he replied, "that appearances are often deceiving. I would not have gone through all the trouble I have so far if I was not confident of victory."

"This still doesn't add up," Chilla said sharply. "If you think you can kill off the Guyver, why the hell do you need us?"

"As I've told you, this is a show," Ma-Mutt said slowly, as if to an addled child. "What is a show if there is no audience? Besides, killing Sho is only act one."

"Then, what is act two?" Mumm-Ra asked, intrigued. The mystic forces, which only he could see, that surrounded what was once his loyal pet were mysterious indeed. Mysterious, and a little unnerving.

"Act two is 'The Slaughter of the ThunderCats'. And all of you are invited to partake."

"Now you're speaking my language," Grune replied with a cruel sneer. "I've got dibs on Lion-O, by the way."

"So, Ma-Mutt," Mumm-Ra said, "how do you plan to lure them all out?" As if on cue, the soil off to the horrid group's right began to swirl seemingly of its own volition as a man-shaped being emerged from it. Moments after Dyme's rather dramatic entrance, the unconscious forms of Pumyra and WilyKat were disgorged from its depths.

"Any questions?"

"Well, my curiosity's been slaked," Alluro replied.

"I think we can work something out," Luna added.

"Oh, yes," Mumm-Ra said next. "Let us secure our new guests. Then, we can hear the rest of Ma-Mutt's plan."

"Master," the dog-like demon began, "you will not regret this."

==========

Lion-O wiped off the sweat which had instantly appeared on his brow as the ThunderClaw descended into the steamy growth of the jungle. Even in the cleared area in which WilyKit was frantically waving the heat was oppressive. Briefly, he wondered how so many different climates could share the same landmass and in such proximity to each other. He absently tugged at the fabric of his new uniform, a one-piece tunic which covered all but his arms and head with subtle armor plating within the torso which bore his ThunderCat insignia.

Snarf just had to make it black, Lion-O thought before focusing entirely upon the unravelling situation. The ThunderStrike set down amid whirling grass and loose dirt, Lion-O killing the engines and departing with Sho just behind. One look at WilyKit's terrified face, and the two belts she held in each hand, told the entire story.

"This is all I could find," she said, her voice trembling and small.

"Any luck with the comm?"

"No. Lion-O, what's happened to them?"

"That's what we're here to find out," he replied as the roar of the ThunderTank drew near.

"The trail I found ended here," WilyKit explained as the three waded into the undergrowth. "It's the weirdest one I've ever seen, too."

"How's that?"

"It's like the ground was all... twisted up, I guess." That remark brought him up cold.

"Lion-O..." Sho said warily.

"Raise Panthro," he snapped, spinning to face Sho. "Tell him to hold position!"

"Got it! Panthro, come in!"

"Panthro here. I'm almost there..."

"Lion-O wants you to hold where you are."

"What?!"

"We think Dyme's involved in this," Lion-O added. "The evidence definitely points to that thing."

"Is it still there?" Panthro asked, his voice tense.

"I think I can find out," Sho replied. "I'll have to call the Guyver, though."

"Do it," Lion-O ordered, unease and tension lending his voice a commanding tone. Sho moved at once, putting as much distance between himself and the two Thunderians as the clearing allowed.

"GUYVER!!"

The damp heat of the jungle vanished as the armor merged with his body. For a brief moment, Sho could have sworn he felt the living armor finish the process of mending his skull before the enhanced eyes showed him what ordinarily he could not see. Heat radiated off of every surface in visible waves, shifting patterns of light spectrums dancing through them in a seemingly random pattern.

Okay, he thought as he focused on the sensor medals atop his helmet. As they shifted back and forth in their tracks, Sho searched for any sign of Dyme, or of Pumyra and WilyKat. Noises both subtle and shrieking from over a mile around met his ears, along with a muttered stream of curses and oaths from Panthro accompanying the growl of the idling ThunderTank.

"Nothing," Sho said at length, deactivating the sensors and letting his perceptions return to as close to normal as the Guyver could come. "No sign of any of them." Sho picked up the wristcomm again and informed Panthro of the current situation. On hearing confirmation, Sho closed the channel and looked at Lion-O and WilyKit.

"Then let's try my sensor," Lion-O said. "Sword of Omens, give me sight beyond sight! Show me our missing friends!"

"Anything?" WilyKit asked at length while the ThunderTank drove into view.

"Nothing. Again." Lion-O lowered the Sword, frustration writ large across his face. "I've got a good idea about their destination, just not where it is."

"Mumm-Ra could be making his next big move," Panthro said as he leapt clear of the vehicle. "They might be in his pyramid."

"That's his style, alright," WilyKit added, smacking a fist into her palm.

"Want me to check it out?" Sho asked.

"We'll all go," Lion-O replied. "It's always better to face Mumm-Ra in force." Sho remained silent, merely nodding. "WilyKit, you're with me. Panthro, take the ThunderTank. Sho, take to the air and stay with us. Don't try to be a hero and challenge Mumm-Ra by yourself."

"I understand," Sho replied before focusing on the gravity controller and going airborne. Even if they weren't in the pyramid, Sho eagerly looked forward to taking on Mumm-Ra again.

==========

Pumyra awoke, chilled to the bone and sore. Slowly and methodically, she took stock of herself as consciousness reasserted itself. She tried to raise a hand to her face only to find unyeilding resistance. Sundry aches made themselves known as the presence of cold metal wound about her body was realized. Finally, the cool stone at her back came to her.

I'm chained up, she thought. Pretty well, too. Can't move an inch. Slowly, Pumyra opened her eyes and inspected herself visually. Chains were wrapped about her arms and torso above and below her bust, with links binding her legs at the knees. Her ankles sported shackles linked with short chain, which she also surmised was on her wrists.

"Mmmmm..." Gagged as well? she thought with some surprise. Where the hell am I? Where's WilyKat?

"Good to see you up," his voice said from her left. Pumyra looked over to see him chained as securely as she. "Gimme a minute, I'll take care of that gag." Pondersously, he scooted himself over to her without losing his balance. She noticed the cloth which hung about his neck. He had been gagged as well, yet had managed to dislodge it. "Almost there," he said, scooting earnestly across the floor toward her.

"Mmmmph," she managed as he crept closer.

"Mind turning your head a little? I need to reach the knot."

"Mmmm." She managed, presenting the back of her head to him.

"Just... gimme a minute. Moving isn't all that easy right now."

"Mmph," Pumyra managed in reply. At long last she felt WilyKat's teeth working the knot holding her gag in place. Before long she felt it loosen to the point where she could spit it out to leave it hanging on her upper chest. "Much better," she said once the offending cloth and wadding were removed.

"I'm sorry, but that's all I can do," WilyKat said, his voice a study in despair.

"Under the circumstances, it's a hell of a lot," Pumyra replied. "WilyKat, thank you."

"For what?" he asked, his voice thick with despair. "We can talk now, so what? We're still tied up, and I don't have a way to change that!"

"That doesn't matter," Pumyra said, ignoring the strain in her bound arms. "We just have to wait for a way out."

"Okay," WilyKat said at length. "Pumyra?"

"Yes?"

"Just don't promise the Lunattaks what you promised Dyme."

"What?"

"I don't ever want to hear you say that one of these bastards can just have you. It's not right!"

"Oh. I see." Pumyra, despite her current situation, found herself touched by his concern. "WilyKat, listen to me."

"All ears."

"I did that only because I was sure Dyme was going to anyway. I was trying to turn that to my advantage, at least so he would release you."

"Still... I don't want you to do something like that. Even if it's for me. Promise me, okay?" The tremor in his voice, its fearful waver, nearly brought her to the same tears she glimpsed in his eyes.

"Alright. I promise."

"Th-Thank you." She watched in rising alarm as his struggles against the chains binding him increased by leaps and bounds.

"Kat, you're hurt! Stop!"

"Nghh... DAMNIT!"

"WilyKat! Stop this! Hurting yourself further isn't going to help!" Slowly, his struggles ceased leaving him panting with tears now flowing freely.

"Damn it all," he said through gritted teeth. "Just like last time..."

"Kat..."

"I couldn't help Cheetara and... and I can't help you either! I'm so useless..."

"WilyKat! Stop that now!" The commanding tone in her voice snapped his eyes to hers. "You are *not* useless! Hey," she continued, her voice softening, "you took my gag off. Situations like this, any small freedom regained is a victory."

"I guess," he replied at length, yet the despair and rage in his eyes still shone bright. "I just wish I could get us out of here."

"The others will come for us. You didn't doubt us when you were a prisoner in Castle Plun-Darr, did you?"

"No!"

"Then don't doubt the ThunderCats here. By the way, any idea where we are?'

"I'm pretty sure we're in SkyTomb," WilyKat replied.

"How so?" She had to keep him talking, she knew, keep his mind off of the self-destructive thoughts which had to be boiling inside him.

"I've been awake for a while, now. The only way to mistake Luna's voice for anything else is if you're deaf."

"Good point." She couldn't help but chuckle at his witticism. Even false bravado was better than utter desperation. "WilyKat?"

"Yeah?"

"How badly are you hurt?"

"Not too bad," he replied. "I'm not bleeding anymore. I'm even sporting a bandage on my side."

The Lunattaks went to that kind of trouble? Pumyra thought. What the hell?

"Don't bother trying to take a look. Kinda tough right now."

"I will once we're out of this. First thing."

"You're the doc, here."

"That's right." Pumyra allowed herself an impish grin. "So, did you enjoy the show, Peeping Tom?"

"Wha... What?!" She turned to look at him as best she could, and saw only confusion.

"I know you were spying on me in the spring."

"I was what? What're you talking about?"

"It's perfectly natural at your age."

"I wasn't spying on you. I didn't even know you were there!"

"Really?"

"Yeah! I wouldn't do stuff like that!"

He's telling the truth, Pumyra realized. "Oh. I'm sorry I accused you, then. I'd felt someone was watching me, and I thought it was you."

"You were skinny-dipping?!" he asked, unable to hide a mischevious grin.

"Well..."

"Oh, wow, I had no idea you'd..."

"WilyKat..."

"Tell you what," he said. "You don't tell anyone I was crying, and I won't tell anyone you were swimming in the buff. Deal?"

"Deal," she said, chuckling. Further conversation was halted when stomping footsteps neared the door to their cell. The lock on the door opened with a low, loud click followed by the grinding of hinges to reveal three shapes in the corridor beyond.

"You seem to be a little tied up at the moment," Chilla said with a malicious leer as she entered, followed by Alluro and, worst of all, Mumm-Ra. The demon priest was still clad in rotting bandages and his tattered shroud, red eyes glowing with hateful glee.

"Can't imagine why," Pumyra retorted. "Whatever you're planning..."

"The ThunderCats won't let us get away with it, we'll never succeed, good always wins, blah blah blah," Alluro mocked. "You sound like a corrupted sound file, you know that?"

"And you look like your arm's seen better days!" WilyKat snapped, glaring at the thin rods protruding from Alluro's crushed wrist. "I saw how that happened. Believe me, you can expect worse this time!"

"Yes, I do owe him for this," he replied. "Speaking of, I believe Chilla here has a debt to your friend from that last encounter."

"Damn right," she snarled, moving to loom over the immobile Pumyra. Without further preamble, Chilla launched a punch which slammed into Pumyra's left cheek with a sharp crack. Another slammed into her jaw, a third into her right eye starred her vision.

"STOP IT!" She heard Kat scream as Chilla's boot rammed into her stomach with vicious force and sent waves of nausea outward from the impact. Finally, a savage backhand landed across her face to leave the coppery tang of blood from a split lower lip.

"You want some, too?" Chilla asked, glaring down at him. "Believe it, kitten, I've got plenty more of this to go around!"

"Enough of this," Mumm-Ra said softly. "You'll have time for more later."

"Oh, yeth," Pumyra said, spitting out bloody saliva. "You're real brave when we can't fight back."

"Take these damn chains off and then try it!" WilyKat roared.

"We'll pass, thank you," Alluro said as he bent down to hook a length of cord to the chains across Kat's torso. Chilla did likewise with Pumyra and, afterward, both found themselves being dragged across the rough stone floor of SkyTomb to whatever fate awaited them.

Beneath the horror of what Chilla had done, behind the utter humiliation of being dragged like a heavy burden of meatfruit, rage burned within WilyKat's mind. He could not chase away the desire for revenge, to hurt them as they had hurt Pumyra. As Slythe had hurt Cheetara.

He found himself in a vision of power, weilding the Sword of Omens as Lion-O did. He imagined throwing off vicious combinations of bone-shattering martial arts techniques in a manner that would make even Panthro proud. As the dingy corridors of SkyTomb slid slowly past and each new bump in the floor aggravated the wound in his side, a darker fantasy emerged.

He saw himself facing down the Mutants, the Lunattaks, Grune, even Mumm-Ra himself, all trembling before the might he would unleash with a single terrible word.

At that moment, WilyKat would have given anything to be able to call upon the Guyver's power. Anything at all.

The hangar of SkyTomb reeked of lubricants and soldered metals. Grease which had accumulated on the hard floor coated her left side as she was dragged across it to the waiting dragon-like tank, the Lunattaker, yet nowhere near enough to facilitate freeing her hands from the shackles which held them at the small of her back. A deep grinding sound vibrated in her ears as the tank's head slowly descended toward them, their chains hooked to an eye bolt welded atop its maw which would leave their bound forms dangling in front of the main cannon once the head was raised. They were left there, Alluro and Chilla moving off to take care of other tasks in preparation for the Lunattaker's deployment while the floor began to shake beneath them.

We're moving, she realized. But to where? If the Lunattaks were just planning to deliver them to the Mutant Army, they wouldn't resort to such dramatic measures. It came to her, then, in a flash of realization.

"We're bait," she said softly.

"I was thinking the same thing," Kat said to her right. "Whatever they're planning, it's got to be huge."

"If they're bold enough to take us on a second time, I agree," Pumyra replied, recalling the shellacking the Lunattaks had taken the last time they had challenged the ThunderCats and the

Guyver. Suddenly, she found herself very worried. Luna and her crowd never played without a stacked deck. What were they up to?

"Pumyra? You okay?"

"I've been better."

"Listen, can I tell you something?"

"Anything," she replied, looking over to his outwardly brave face.

"No matter what happens..."

"Don't talk like that."

"I've gotta. No matter what happens to us, I'm glad I got the chance to meet you." Pumyra's heart threatened to burst at that moment at the purity of his words and the innocent love within them.

"I am, too," she said, leaning over to plant a delicate kiss on his forehead. "If I had it all to do over again, I wouldn't change a...

"SHUT THE HELL UP, WOULD YOU?!" TugMug's enraged roar startled them both, snapping their gazes to his squat form before he lunged forward with a roll of silver adhesive tape. He applied several strips above Pumyra's mouth before giving the same treatment to WilyKat. "Son of a bitch, if that was any more sugary, I'd be diabetic right now!"

Silenced again, Pumyra could only glare daggers at TugMug's retreating back. This, she thought, gets old really fast.

==========

"Anything?" Cheetara asked.

"Still nothing," Lynx-O replied.

"Sitrep," she said, casting a quick glance at the fidgety form of Bengali at the other side of the controls.

"Nothing... wait... I'm picking up SkyTomb just inside the periphery of our sensors."

They know we can see them, Cheetara thought as the images on the viewscreen focused themselves. "I am picking up movemnt toward our position, as well as lifesigns of two of our own."

"Main screen," she said, bracing herself for the sight. "Jaga's cape..."

"Grrrrrr... We have to get out there!" Bengali roared, slamming a fist on the control panel before him.

"I am receiving a signal from the Lunattaker," Lynx-O said. "Audio only."

"Put it through."

"Where is Guyver?" Luna's screeching voice demanded.

"Release our friends! Now!"

"We shall speak only to the Guyver," Luna replied. "Put us through to him, or watch your two friends suffer."

She's serious, Cheetara thought. "Very well. Lynx-O, patch them through."

"Understood," he replied, re-routing the signal to Sho's wristcomm, as well as the communication gear in the ThunderClaw and ThunderTank.

"Incoming communicaiton," Lynx-O's voice said over the wristcomm.

"Receiving," Sho replied, bringing the device to his face as the desert of sinking sands raced beneath.

"I am speaking to the Guyver?" came a familiar annoying voice.

"That's right. What do you want?"

"You had best watch your tone," Luna said, "or you might find two of your buddies a little worse for wear."

"What?!"

"Take a listen to this." Sho heard the frequency change, filled now with a low wind and mechanical grinding.

"Mmmmm...."

"Oh, no..." Even muffled, he recognized WilyKat's voice.

"MMMMmmMMMMMMPH!" two voices cried amid the sound of crackling electricity.

"Stop it, damn you!" Sho roared.

"That," Luna's voice returned, "is the fate which awaits them if you're too late."

"Where are they?!"

"I'm sending you the coordinates. You have fifteen minutes, or no one ever sees them again."

"I have it, too," Lion-O said. "They're in the area of the Tower."

"That's a long haul from here," Panthro added. "Kid, you'd better pull out all the stops if you wanna get there in time!"

"I'm on it!" Without another word, Sho changed course to the coordinates provided by Luna. The two vehicles which he had accompanied rapidly shrank behind as he commanded the Guyver to carry him with all speed. Teleporting, though he was far enough away for it to work, demanded too much power, and he felt he would need all he could possibly get.

"Cheetara, come in!"

"Cheetara here, Lion-O."

"Put Snarfer on watch duty. Gather the remaining ThunderCats and rendevous with Sho at the given coordinates. We'll be there as soon as we can."

"How long before he arrives?" she asked.

"From the way he took off," Panthro replied, "ten minutes. Maybe less."

"Get there as soon as you can, but don't interfere," Lion-O ordered. "The Lunattaks called him out, not us. We can't risk them hurting Pumyra and WilyKat because we crashed the party."

"Understood. Cheetara out."

"Lion-O, what're we gonna do?" WilyKit asked, her voice tight and eyes wide. "We can't let them..."

"I hate to say it," he replied, cutting her off, "but for now their fates are in Sho's hands."

"I just hope that kid doesn't fly off the damn handle," Panthro's voice said over the ThunderClaw's comm system. "He doesn't have us backing him this time."

==========

Weird, Sho thought as another stretch of desert raced beneath him. He focused the sensors on his helmet forward, his confusion growing into unease. He detected six life signs which had to be the Lunattaks, three Thunderians one of which had to be Grune, and a strange presence which did not quite register as alive. Mumm-Ra, then. As he raced nearer, two more presences came within range. One just as strange as Mumm-Ra, and another which almost conformed to a Zoanoid. Dyme, it had to be.

Looks like the gang's all together, he thought. But, where the hell is Lisker? Unless they all want to take me on at once, he'd be their best bet for taking me out. Why isn't he there? The telepathic link between them was inert at the moment, yet that wouldn't enable Guyver Two to hide from his sensors. The time for pondering ended abruptly at the sight of the dragon shaped tank in the distance. Pumyra and WilyKat hung from its snout, wrapped tightly in chains with tape securing their mouths. The sight of it made Sho's blood boil with rage.

To hell with convention, he thought. I won't give those bastards the chance to use my friends against me. The chains, he noticed, were easily breakable. He'd have them out of that predicament postehaste, then come back and settle up with Mumm-Ra and his cronies.

The links dug into her skin with merciless pressure, yet Pumyra refused to give what limited voice she had to her discomfort. She took deep breaths through her nose and ignored as best she was able the main gun of the Lunattaker which was at her and WilyKat's backs. They hadn't been suspended up there just for effect, she was sure, and worrying about that launcher going off would serve no purpose. She glanced sidelong at WilyKat, who stared out with eyes wide and bewildered. Puzzled, she followed his gaze.

What the? she thought as the aerial form of the Guyver raced closer and closer. Why is Sho here? Why's he alone? Pumyra had been certain that the Lunattaks would call out the ThunderCats and use their hostages as leverage to keep Guyver out of the equation. Had they called him out alone? Either they'd lost their heads or...

"Mmmm..." WilyKat moaned.

Or, she finished, wanting to voice her fears as well, Guyver Two was waiting in the wings. Pumyra couldn't help but recall how the other Guyver had mangled Sho so badly in their last encounter. As Guyver One drew nearer, she felt heat gather at her back as the launcher primed to fire and the situation resolved itself in her mind.

He'll try for a quick rescue, she thought, and the Lunattaks will fry us all!

"MMMMMMMMPH! MblMMM!" she cried, willing Sho to understand what she could not say.

"Time to leave!" he shouted as he covered the last few feet, a hand already reaching for the chains which suspended them.

"NMMMMPH! MM-MMM!" Pumyra shouted, shaking her head furiously. "GMMMPH!"

"Just a second..."

"Hold it, boy!"

Sho's hand stopped cold at Luna's screech. He glared down at his assembled enemies, eyeing the remote control in the hand of the Lunattak leader. He then looked back to Pumyra and WilyKat, both shaking their heads in the negative, and saw the glow pulsing behind them.

"Son of a bitch," he cursed, furious. Pumyra's muffled shouts of alarm made sense to him now.

"Break those chains," Red-Eye said, "and we fire the main gun!"

"I get it," Sho spat.

"Best get down here," Mumm-Ra added, his broken and jagged teeth showing in a rancid parody of a smile.

"I'll get you out of here," Sho said to them before descending to the throng below. His feet met with the hardpack of the desert amid a small cloud of dust as he glared at each of them in turn. "I'm here. Now let them go."

"Let me think," Luna said. "Hmmm... No."

"I see how it is. So, one at a time or all at once?"

"Oh, don't be so naieve dear boy," came a giggling voice from the opposite side of the strange vehicle. Sho took a long look at the dog-like person in Egyptian garb who came into view. "They are not your main concern here."

"I guess you are." Sho stared at him in complete bewilderment. Something was maddeningly familiar about the creature, his enhanced sight pointed out, but what?

"Tell me, Guyver One, what do you know of art?"

"What?!"

"Art! Performance! Oh, don't tell me you're a complete philistine! Well." It paused there, studying him with malevolent eyes. "I guess a brute such as yourself wouldn't trouble himself with the works of the Bard."

"What bard? What the hell are you babbling about?"

"Why, Shakespeare!" it howled, giving a pealing laugh that sent cold fingers down Sho's spine. "Such a fine playwright."

"'What's in a name? A rose by any other name would smell as sweet'."

"AH! So you *do* have some artistry in your soul! Marvellous!"

"What do you want?!" Sho shouted, becoming more and more irritated and uneasy.

"I was hoping you'd ask," it said in reply, its voice now silky with dark joy. "What I want is to put on a show. Starring myself, of course. And you."

"What's this show called?" Sho asked, certain he knew the answer.

"'The Death of the Guyver'."

"I kinda thought that." It's arrogant, Sho thought. Instincts kicked in at that moment, notions of what he had once been becoming active. It's gotta have good reason to be. "So, what're they here for?" he asked, jerking a thumb at the gathering of evil which was now behind him.

"An audience. As well as your ThunderCat friends who have just arrived." At that moment, Cheetara, Lynx-O, and Bengali came into range of the sensor medals. "Don't worry," it said, "they won't be part of the show. Not the first act, at least."

"Do you really think they won't jump in?" Sho snarled. "You've got two of their own as hostages."

"They will not," Mumm-Ra said from behind. "I have made certain of that."

"Just you, me, and Dyme, huh?" Sho, despite his outward demeanor, was becoming more than a little worried.

"Good guess," Dyme said as the earth beneath the creature's feet flowed up into a humanoid shape to stand next to it.

"The stage is set," it began, "the players are assembled, and the audience is in place. Now, it is time to see how you perform!"

"Bring it on!" Sho assumed one of the combat stances Panthro had taught him, left leg in front of right, arms raised and ready.

"And now, I introduce myself," it said, its voice changing into a strange blend of frequencies. Muscle bulged beneath its skin, patches of white hair sprouting in its chest and forearm as the hands became black and scaled, the claws gleaming red. Its body nearly doubled in size, the neck becoming serpentine and two fangs sprouting out perpindicular to is maw and curving sharply downward. An additional pair of eyes grew in behind and above the two it already possessed. Four multi-jointed appendages shot out from its back, each ending in a claw-like pincer lined with white fur at its base. Sho took in the horrid image, and another memory was triggered of a creature frighteningly similar. "Once I bore the lowly name Ma-Mutt. Now," it said in its curious voice, "I am known as Enzyme!!"

"Oh, no," WilyKit said at the sight of her brother and Pumyra chained and helpless. She then saw the creatures which Sho faced. "What are they?!"

"Bad news," Panthro replied as he leapt clear of the ThunderTank. "Lynx-O, is that barrier still in place?"

"I am afraid so," he said. "I can find no way to penetrate it."

"Then," Lion-O added, "Sho's on his own."

Oh, shit! Sho thought as he leapt back from Enzyme's lunging swipe, memories of that particular horror surfacing in fragments. Its speed was blinding, and his dodge had been barely in time. He landed securely only for the ground to shift beneath and throw off his balance. Enzyme spat something from its gaping maw, a green sludge that impacted with his shin and sent pain through the afflicted limb.

"How was that?!" Enzyme hooted as the armor melted beneath the coating of slime to leave it deformed and stiff. "I was remade into the perfect enemy for you! My body produces a substance which breaks down the structure of your armor!"

DAMNIT! Sho thought before dodging a lunging blow from Dyme's humanoid form. He had to finish this fast, he knew, but the speed at which this new Enzyme moved made using the megasmasher impossible. His right foot sank into Dyme's earthen form, sticking long enough for Enzyme to land a harsh blow to his right breastplate and rip through it easily. Sho flew backward to land in the soft spot Dyme had prepared for him. The soupy mud held like glue as Enzyme charged over to him.

Oh, no you don't. Sho engage the gravity controller, ripping free of Dyme's reach and leaving Enzyme striking only dirt. He locked onto Enzyme's back with the sonic buster when the whine of the Lunattaker's main gun reached him.

"You fly," Red-Eye said around a toothless smirk, "they die."

THINK! Sho commanded himself as he disengaged the gravity controller and dropped to the possessed earth. I've fought Dyme before, and I won. How? I gotta take him out first! Sho bounded to the left immediately after landing, gaining precious seconds as both Dyme and Enzyme missed him. Another fragment of memory came to him, of his previous battle with the Lost Number, and Sho nearly smiled. It would be close, but he could pull it off!

Sho allowed himself to land feet first on the soil which instantly coiled about his lower legs. He had to make this look good.

"Now you're mine!" Enzyme hooted as it lunged forward. Sho fell backward just before the fatal impact, extending his sonic swords as he did so. The twin blades impaled Dyme, a scream which was inhuman and horrid splitting the air.

"Yeah, that's the way!" Panthro cheered as the earth which comprised Dyme's transformed state began to undulate wildy, throwing the strange acid shooting creature along with the Lunattaks and company off-balance. Dyme's wail changed pitch wildly as pieces of its body began to fall off in clumps, reforming only to be cast off again by Sho's relentless attack.

"N... NooooOOOO!" Dyme shrieked as the waves of sonic force hammered through him again and again. "Not agaiiiinnn! NOT AGAIIINNN!!!!" Desperate, he turned to Mumm-Ra only to find his master fighting to keep his balance. "HELP ME!"

"No way, Dyme!" he turned to the prone form of the Guyver, his twin blades deep in the earth. "This time, YOU STAY DEAD!"

Even though the layers of tape rendered him practically mute, WilyKat cheered Sho on as hard as he was able while Dyme crumbled away into dust. The rattling shake of the Lunattaker ended at once, leaving his wounded side aching anew yet his hopes soaring. If Sho could take down that dirt monster so easily, then whatever Ma-Mutt wanted to call himself now oughtta be easy pickings!

The next, terrible instant proved him very wrong.

Alright! Sho thought as he flipped himself back onto his feet. One down, one to...

"GYAAAAGH!"

Oh, no... Pumyra looked on in horrified despair as the Enzyme creature streaked toward Sho's unprotected back with speed defying its size. The pincers atop each tentacle-like growth from its back speared through Sho's arms and legs, pinning him as securely as any butterfly in a collector's case. Enzyme's clawed hands dug into Sho's ribs through the armor, melting it like ice cream before all six appendages hoisted him upward.

"And now," it said, flexing its serpentine neck, "your curtain call!" Pumyra could not look away despite her desperate desire not to see the shower of gore which gushed from the top of Sho's head, Enzyme's dripping fangs piercing and melting the strange armor and sinking into his brain. The gag swallowed her voice as she cried out his name in horror, of utter negation, of what she was witnessing. With a sickening crunch, the top of Sho's skull collapsed and Enzyme ripped free a large portion of his brain. The eyes of the armor, at the death of its wearer, winked out in an instant.

"No..." Lion-O's rage quickly boiled, his grip on the Sword of Omens whitening his knuckles amid cheers and cries of "Bravo!" from the Lunattaks. His teeth ground together of their own accord, heat within soaring with his pulse.

"Bastards," Panthro spat. He heard Cheetara's groan of dismay and revulsion at Enzyme's display of cruelty as it bounced Sho's corpse (and how strange it was to think of him that way, he thought briefly) about like a marionette.

"And that concludes Act One!" Enzyme roared in mad glee. "Sho, you were excellent! Take a bow!" With its tentacles, Enzyme manipulated Sho's lifeless body into a grim and sickening imitation of acceptance of accolades. "Now, after a brief interlude, Act Two shall begin!"

"And we're the stars in your gruesome display?!" Tygra shouted in outrage.

"It's not titled 'The Slaughter of the ThunderCats' for nothing!" Enzyme replied. It released Sho, kicking the dead human in the stomach on the way down so that he landed face-up.

"Get ready!" Lion-O snarled.

"You don't want to do that," came a gravelly, calm voice from his left. As one, the ThunderCats look over to find a thin, cloaked man standing half a dozen feet away.

"Who are you?" Bengali demanded.

"Just someone who knows quite a bit about Guyvers in general," he replied, the top half of his face concealed by the cowl. "In another ten seconds, that pseudo-Enzyme and the rest of that bunch are going to learn a few things about Guyvers as well."

Pumyra resisted the tears as best she was able, yet some still flowed at the sight of the human she had been coming to call a friend. She knew so little about him, yet the sudden loss of him was like a stab through her heart. WilyKat, she saw, was weeping openly, his eyes squeezed shut from the terrible sight.

"Mmmmkt," she tried, yet he did not hear her. Frustration mounted with alacrity at her inability to help him, Sho, herself, her friends as Mumm-Ra recited the chant which allowed him to change into his ever-living form. She struggled against her bonds, though she knew it to be futile, when a faint glimmer caught her eye from below.

The control medal? she thought, perplexed. Why is it glowing like that? What's... JAGA'S BEARD! which came out as a muffled scream.

"What's it doing?" Grune asked, suddenly nervous as the medallion on the Guyver's head began to glow. The shine grew by leaps and bounds, becoming near-blinding as the shriek of its inner workings reached a shrill pitch.

"Was this part of the script, Mr. Producer?" TugMug asked, feeling uneasy himself as the body began to twitch.

"This is... impossible!" Enzyme exclaimed. "It..."

"He's getting up!" Cheetara exclaimed.

"How?" WilyKit asked, her entire body shaking with fright. "Half his head's gone!"

"If the host is ever incapacitated for longer than thirty seconds," the stranger among them replied, "the control medal assumes command of the armor and what viable systems are left within the host."

"So you're saying that it's not Sho doing this?"

"That is correct, Lion-O. You are about to see," he began waving a hand toward the insane tableaux, "a Guyver's full wrath, unfettered and raw. Not many ever see this and, of that number, far fewer live to tell about it."

"Just what're you saying, here?" Panthro demanded.

"Your friends are in no danger. However, if you wish to survive what's about to occur, you must do as I say."

"Heed him, Lion-O!" The ephemeral form of Jaga appeared before him, his voice hard and commanding. "I know not this man's name, but there is no lie in his words!"

"Very well," Lion-O said. "What would you have us do?"

"Just watch."

Ma-Mutt/Enzyme glared at the mutilated, and somehow active, Guyver as its' now-red eyepieces seemed to study each of them in turn. Anger warred for dominance with fear as he prepared his next assault. The Ancient Spirits hadn't told him anything about this!

"Call me stupid," Alluro said, "but shouldn't he be dead by now?"

"You're stupid," Enzyme replied, "and yes. But, some actors just don't know when to give up the stage!"

Enzyme rushed forward, spewing a glob of corrosive slime which Guyver easily dodged. Strike after strike, swipe after spit, the Guyver deftly danced about his attacks in utter and eerie silence.

"Fight back, damn you!" Enzyme shouted, lunging forward with a sweeping right arm followed by two of the pincered tentacles. Guyver, as if he'd heard, responded by dashing into the arc of the swing and searing agony raced up Enzyme's side as his arm and both tentacles were severed neatly to land on the dirt oozing corrosive blood.

Guyver suffered as well, hopping back out of range. The plates covering his right arm were twisted and still running in some spaces, the sonic sword snapping off at the base to clatter onto the ground.

"Ghu.... What the hell ARE you!"

"That's what I want to know," Bengali said in stunned shock. "What's going on here, anyway?"

"The Guyver falls under the mental sway of its host to better optimize the symbiote's relationship with him," the unknown man replied. "However, without that host aboard as a sort of moral compass, the Guyver reverts to its actual nature."

"A killing machine," Lynx-O said calmly.

"It *is* a weapon, after all. It won't run away."

Just then, Guyver moved once more. It leapt toward Enzyme, only to be speared through the solar plexus with one of its remaining tentacles. Guyver did not miss a beat in firing the head beam directly into the closest joint of the appendage, severing it before snatching it free of his body with a sick pop.

"Sacred Leoran," Cheetara breathed, invoking the name of the first Thunderian monarch, "doesn't it feel pain?!"

"Guyver does not know pain. Nor fear or mercy. Its only instinct is to survive."

Enzyme barely managed to avoid the missile which had once been part of him as it sailed close enough to split the skin on the side of his face. Despite the haze of agony and the loss of blood, he still heard the *thunk* of the projectile impacting something soft. A quick glance showed the Lunattak leader, Luna, flying backward from her mount with said appendage firmly in her chest. He barely had time to register the little freak's death before a pair of arms circled his elongated neck and began to tighten with unbelievable force. His air cut off and stress on his vertebrea increasing exponentially, Enzyme reached about with his surviving arm and dug his claws as deeply as he could across Guyver's armored back. His last-ditch move proved fruitless as all feeling vanished with the sound of his neck breaking and consciousness fading.

"MMmmmmmm..." Pumyra could only watch in a mix of utter horror and scientific fascination. Sho, she knew, could not be controlling the Guyver. Then who or what was?

The control medal, she realized as Amok began wailing over Luna's death. From her hazardous vantage point, she found she could actually see into the remains of his brain and noticed that the visible tissue was writhing. No. It was regrowing! Had she not been so stunned at that notion, Pumyra would have shaken her head in disbelief. Even his miraculous recovery from the beating Lisker had given him didn't measure up to this!

Amok, in his simple and stupid way, stared down at the deceased form of Luna which lay on the ground, an island in an ocean of her own blood. He had been her mount since before she could walk, though she never quite managed to get the hang of that, and loved her in what limited way he was able. Grunting and snarling, he turned to face the Guyver, actually managing to cry over her loss.

"You kill Luna!" he screamed, hatred consuming his small mind. "Amok kill you BACK!"

"We have to get Pumyra and WilyKat out of there!" Lion-O shouted as Amok charged the Guyver. The Lunattaks masive arms came down in an arc that would have shattered a boulder, yet Guyver caught each one and held them firmly in place.

"Your friends are safe," the unknown man said in response. At that moment, Guyver yanked back on Amok's arms, bringing a tortured wail from the hulking beast before a solid kick to his chest sent him sailing backward...

With each of Amok's arms still in the Guyver's iron grip.

"Care to tell me how the hell you figure that?!" Panthro demanded over Amok's howling screams. The Lunattak, for his part, lay writhing in a rapidly expanding lake of crimson. Guyver cast the arms aside with as little care as anyone swatting an insect before making an unnervingly graceful somersault to land astride Amok's abused torso. His right arm lanced downward, crushing Amok's skull and sending a radiating splatter of gore across the hard surface of the desert.

"There's Grune!" WilyKit said, pointing to the retreating shape of a Skycutter bearing the Thunderian and the unmistakeable form of Chilla.

"Hmph. Those two are the only ones in that motley group to have shown any intelligence."

"Again, damnit!" Panthro said, stalking over to the hooded man. "How the fuck can you say our people are safe!"

"The Guyver," he explained, "while in defense mode, will crush anything it sees as a threat to itself and the host. Do you honestly think your two friends can pose a threat like that?" He pointed to their suspended forms in emphasis. "Those chains, Panthro, are what will keep them from harm."

"What about Grune and Chilla?" Tygra asked as TugMug, Alluro, and Mumm-Ra each began an assault on Guyver.

"They got far enough away in time. It will not bother to chase them. Once all threats have been dealt with, the control medal will dedicate all its energy into restoring Sho."

Mumm-Ra was at an utter loss for how such a promising plan could have turned to shit so quickly. TugMug's gravity carbine fired over and over, Guyver evading each round before closing in swinging its remaining blade downward to slice the squat Lunattak lengthwise. Before the two halves of TugMug's body could hit the dirt, Alluro threw the remade orb of his psych club only for the Guyver to slap it away in a cloud of dust and jagged fragments.

"NO! GET AWAY! NNOOO..." With an upward axe kick, Mumm-Ra heard Alluro's skull separate from his spine at the base. The skin stretched almost comically, leaving Alluro's head dangling loosely between his shoulders. Guyver did not lose a moment, evading both Mumm-Ra's burst of power and Red-Eye's disc.

The emerald beam on Guyver's helmet fired twice, each bolt piercing the toothless Lunattak's eyes and leaving them a running ruin of glop. Red-Eye grabbed his upper face with one hand, the other waving about frantically as he screamed at the full capacity of his lungs. In an instant, Guyver's hand encased Red-Eye's skull and a gout of brain matter and crushed skull fragments sprayed liberally about the area. Guyver stood there a moment longer before releasing Red-Eye's lifeless and twitching corpse whence it fell gracelessly to the earth.

Holy SHIT! WilyKat thought, using one of Panthro's aphorisms. He gazed about in awe at the destruction, the complete and total carnage which had once been a group of the ThunderCat's

deadliest enemies. He then looked at Sho, whose red eyes were glaring directly at Mumm-Ra, with a shiver of fear.

He hasn't even looked at us, he thought. In fact, the Wildcat realized with dawning comprehension, he hasn't even attacked! He's just *counter*attacking! Wide-eyed, he turned his head to lock gazes with Pumyra.

"MMMbl. MMM MMt MMk rrrss." DAMN TAPE! he raged. Pumyra stared at him quizzically at first until he started pointing his head at the two below. Then to the ThunderCats and that weird guy in the cloak.

"What does it take to kill you?!" Mumm-Ra shouted before loosing another blast of magic.

What is he trying to tell me? Pumyra tried to puzzle through his muffled words and strange actions. Pointing to Sho and Mumm-Ra, pointing to the other ThunderCats, nodding to me....

A pattern began to emerge, and were her wrists not chained she would have slapped a hand to her forehead for not seeing it sooner. Sho, or the control medal, was only attacking when attacked itself! WilyKat was looking at her again, and she nodded her understanding. The unknown man standing near Lion-O must be telling them all the same thing, she realized. That's why they haven't joined in! Pumyra let free a muffled chuckle at the irony of it all.

For once in my life, she mused, I'm actually *happy* to be tied up!

By all the hells, Mumm-Ra thought as Guyver dodged yet another burst of power, what is he made of?! Guyver charged forward far faster than he anticipated, his remaining blade slashing deep into his chest. Mumm-Ra roared in pain before an uppercut forced his feet to part ways with the dirt. Before he could right himself, he felt Guyver's hands grip his arms like vices and drag him upward.

What the... OOOOF! The impact to his head sent him barrelling down the to the ground, the earth cratering at impact with Guyver's feet slamming into his stomach with equal force. With magics straining to keep him alive, Guyver crouched down to rain blow after blow to his face.

Though he would never admit it, he had used a random spell to knock the Guyver clear. Mumm-Ra rose shakily, mortified at this magnitude of failure.

"Surrender!" he roared, preparing a spell he would aim at WilyKat and Pumyra. "If... WHAT!" Mumm-Ra had to cancel the killing spell to summon energy for a shield as he saw Guyver grasp its fully-healed breastplates. The lenses appeared, glowing with their incredible light as Mumm-Ra was divided between his shield and his teleport.

Pumyra could merely watch as the immense beam lanced out into the world to envelop Mumm-Ra in its glare. The demon's right arm remained visible, hitting the ground as the body it had been attached to was utterly destroyed. She let out a muffle cry of disbelief as Mumm-Ra vanished into the light as it scorched the desert and whatever lay beyond.

Oh, my... she thought lamely as the light faded to leave a trail of devestation in its wake. Mumm-Ra's arm lay curling on the sand only to dissolve into dust.

==========

Maftet, the Lynx god, rushed into the center of Mumm-Ra's treasure stash at a desperate pace. He felt his power draining as he sprinted, what little time afforded to him becoming scarce.

There! he thought, eyeing the chest which contained that which Mumm-Ra feared most. Maftet grasped its handles in his jaws and groaned in pleasure at the holy magic which surged through his frame.

Not much time left, he thought, abandoning his conscripted duties and phasing into the air outside the Black Pyramid.

To be worshipped just once more, Maftet thought as he galloped across the sky. Such would be so sweet. Maftet knew it to be impossible.

The White Pyramid, he thought as he carried the sacred talisman between his fangs and let its magics give him the life he needed. Mumm-Rana needed to see what her ancient enemy had kept from her.

==========

"Moons of Thundera," Lion-O said lamely as the white beam faded and the sun began its journey below the horizon. He recalled the last time he had seen Sho use that weapon, and the great effect it had displayed. Mumm-Ra's arm lay inert and shrunken on the desert floor, shrivelling up and fading into dust with the ghost of an inhuman screech as the dark cloud was caught up in the winds and carried off.

"It is finished," the unnamed human said as he turned his back. "You will know when Guyver One has regained himself."

"What about..."

"For the last time, you need not worry about them," he replied crossly. "They will be fine. Do not approach Sho until the proper time."

"And that'll be?"

"You will know," he replied, turning to take his leave. "I am certain we will meet again. I look forward to that day, ThunderCats. Perhaps it is our destiny." The image of him faded into nothingness as he walked away, leaving the ThunderCats in an unusual spot.

"Look," Cheetara said. "Sho's wounds are almost healed." It was true. The various lesions Enzyme had inflicted on him, not to mention the savage injury to his head, were nearly gone.

After a few moments, the gap in his skull sealed. The Guyver's eyes became white once more with the expulsion of gasses from the vents on his faceplates and a brilliant glow from the control medal.

"Uhhh..." was all he said before the Guyver left him and Sho fell to the earth in his human form.

"Let's move," Lion-O snapped once Sho hit the dirt.

Pumyra was glad to feel the earth beneath her feet as Bengali's skilled hammer smashed away her chains.

"LOVE!" she exclaimed, ecstatic at being able to speak once Cheetara removed the tape from her lips, and embraced him with all the ferocity she could muster.

"I'm so glad you're okay," his rough voice rumbled in her ear.

"WilyKat!" He looked up as his sister glomped onto him, holding on for what seemed to be dear life.

"Hey, Sis," he said somewhat weakly as he embraced her trembling form.

"You damned IDIOT!" she shrieked as she held onto him even tighter. "Why didja have to scare me like that?!"

"It's not my fault!" WilyKat exclaimed. He felt his sister's tears soaking his tunic, and held onto her even more tightly. "Hey, Kit, all's well that ends well."

"Just... just don't ever do that again!" she wailed, practically bawling.

"I won't," he said, kissing her cheek.

"Hey, big cat." he turned his head to find Pumyra standing arm-in-arm with Bengali.

"You okay?"

"Better than that," she replied with a soft smile. "WilyKat, I want to tell you that you were extremely brave just then."

"Awww... It was..."

"No," Pumyra cut him off. "You were amazing under those circumstances. Thank you."

"No problem," he replied with a furious blush.

"I should thank you as well," Bengali said. "From what I hear, you really helped Pumyra."

"It's just what any ThunderCat would do," he said with a furious blush.

"Hey, Bro, congrats!"

"Heh. I mean, it wasn't like we were in any danger, once I figured it out."

"Pumyra told me," Lion-O said as he ambled over.

"How's Sho?"

"Asleep in the ThunderTank for now. So, how did it come to you?"

"I saw that Sho wasn't going after them until they tried for him. It was kinda simple from there. I figured that weird guy must have been telling you the same thing."

"He was," Lion-O replied as he reached down to tussle WilyKat's mane. "There's more to that one than meets they eye, that's for sure."

"That was freakin' SCARY!" WilyKit exclaimed, clasping hands with her brother. "What if he'd gone after you?!"

"He didn't," WilyKat replied.

"Still," Tygra said, "we must have a council session upon our return to the Tower. This matter bears serious discussion." WilyKat glanced over at the ThunderTank in which Sho slept.

Thank you, he thought, embracing his sister even more tightly than before and feeling her return the gesture. I know you weren't at the controls, but as far as I'm concerned it was still you.

"Hmph. So, that's the way it is."

None of the jubilant crowd below noticed the golden-armored figure as it took to the air. Oswald Lisker fumed at Mumm-Ra's audacity in trying to kill Guyver One without him. Sho was *his* prey, damnit!

Just be grateful you're dead, you fucking freak, Lisker thought as the landscape raced beneath him.

==========

In the next episode:

Sho awakens and is shown what the Guyver did while he was incapacitated. Doubt plagues the boy as he contemplates leaving the ThunderCats once and for all. Myrlha and Salvador reach

Darkside, nearing the end of their perilous journey to find the ThunderCats. Sho faces a difficult choice as memories return of his most painful battle, and his resolve begins to weaken. Can Panthro bring him out of his funk, or will Sho depart the ThunderCats despite the grave threat Oswald Lisker still poses to Cheetara's life? All this and more in the next episode of One Last War to Fight.