ThunderCats

Bio-Booster Armor Guyver

One Last War to Fight

Episode Twenty-One: Painful Recollections

By Knight Writer

What has happened?

Mumm-Rana rose from her golden sarcophagus, alert though confused. At the edges of her mystical perception she sensed a great recession in the forces of darkness on Third Earth. Puzzled, she took the first step toward her scrying pool before an ancient presence entered her awareness.

"Show yourself!" she commanded. Before her appeared a lynx whose coat was dull and balding, lesions showing where the fur had fallen away. A threadbare cloak of what had once been the purest midnight blue hung in loose disregard about its bony shoulders. "Maftet!" Mumm-Rana cried out in joy at seeing him, and alarm at his current state. Between his fangs dangled a box wrought with ancient holy releifs.

"Mumm-Rana," he said once he placed his burden upon the floor. "Long have I wished to see you again."

"How have you escaped your bondage to Mumm-Ra?" she asked, kneeling down before the panting lynx and placing a loving hand atop his head.

"The demon is destroyed." Mumm-Rana took an involuntary gasp at those four words.

"Impossible!"

"It... is true. At least," Maftet took a great breath, as though the effort of speaking was nearly too great for him, "his body is. If he returns, it may be the work of centuries."

"How has this happened?!" Mumm-Rana asked, joyous.

"I know not... dearest one. I have used up... the last of what little power I had left to bring... you this."

"This is from Mumm-Ra's trove?" she asked, eyeing the treasure.

"What is inside," he said, "is written in an ancient tongue, its words protected by ten thousand blessings. The sight of it... is too painful ghaaakkk... to Mumm-Ra's eyes. He had it sealed within his tomb... to keep it from you."

"Maftet, do not exert yourself further," Mumm-Rana pleaded, tears flowing at the wretched sight of him.

"I must... What is inside is the rest... of the Prophecy."

"The Prophecy of Destruction?!" she asked, incredulous.

"Use it... well..." Maftet, his strength depleted, collapsed on the pristine floor of the White Pyramid.

"Maftet..." She cupped his muzzle with her other hand, bringing his once-noble and fierce visage to her own.

"To be in the light," he said, his voice faint and dreamy, "once more... To be with... you... my love..."

"It shall be done," Mumm-Rana said, choking back tears she thought long since dried. She summoned her restored power, feeding it into the dying form of Maftet. His deteriorating body faded into a sphere of the purest light which pulsed in the manner of a living heart. Slowly, the light neared the side of her sarcophagus to rest at its head. With a final spell, the light coalesced into the proud and regal lynx he once had been carved in relief by her place of rest.

Mumm-Rana knelt beside the stone form of him, embracing it in remembrance of the last time she had been with him. Before Mumm-Ra had destroyed his power by way of slaughtering his worshippers and enslaved his spirit. Their one night of fire still ignited the sorceress's dreams in her slumber, he in his true form and her still mortal. Pushing aside the cruelties of fate, she kissed the top of the statue's head lovingly.

"Rest, dearest Maftet," she said, her voice still trembling with emotion. At one time his high presitess, only once his lover, and now vanguard of the Ancient Spirits of Light, Mumm-Rana rose to her feet and summoned the ancient chest to her hands. "I must know what has transpired before I attempt to translate this," she said as she cradled the box and finished the journey to the scrying pool. Mumm-Rana waved her free hand over the serene water, she saw the Destroyer in its depths.

I should have known that thing would be involved, she thought sourly as the scene played out. He was still deceiving the ThunderCats, she saw, and still endangering them with his existence. She saw an enhanced Ma-Mutt seemingly kill the Destroyer in a manner she would not wish on her worst enemy, then saw him rise again despite the savage wound in his head.

He's certainly tough to put down, she thought recalling her own encounter, but keeping him down is another matter altogether! One by one, as they tried to finish the task of slaying him,

Ma-Mutt and nearly all of the Lunattaks fell before him. Lastly, it was Mumm-Ra's turn. The intense light from his chest enveloped all but Mumm-Ra's arm, leaving only it and a massive path of destruction.

Amazing, she thought bitterly. The destruction of her most ancient enemy brought about by another force of evil. And this one could not even summon its full power yet!

"He has grown stronger," she said to the avatars of the Ancient Ones.

"Indeed."

"Had I been able to kill him then... Perhaps this remaining piece of the Prophecy will contain some clue?"

"The protections upon the chest are quite powerful," they replied as one. "Removing them will require time."

"The one thing I have in abundance," Mumm-Rana said with a rueful shake of her head, "and Third Earth may be running out of."

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The sun had long since set as the ThunderCats took their seats about the control center of the Tower of Omens. Disposal of the corpses of the Lunattaks had been simple enough with the flamethrower with which Panthro had replaced the water launcher. The remains of Ma-Mutt, on the other hand, had dissolved into a bubbling puddle of sludge entirely on its own. Determining the functional nature of the Lunataker and SkyTomb had also proven uncomplicated, if somewhat ponderous.

"I now call this meeting to order," Tygra said after a sip of hot coffee. "Turmagar, thank you for joining us."

"You told me the tactical situation had drastically changed," the Tuska commander replied, "but I began to wonder in what way when I saw you escorting SkyTomb. My men received the Lunattak transmission as well."

"I'll make this brief. Save for Chilla, who managed to escape with Grune, The Lunattaks have been eradicated. Also, Ma-Mutt has been killed. It is difficult to say with Mumm-Ra, but I am confident in assessing that, at the very least, he will be out of our hair for a while to come."

"To think Sho capable of such a thing," Turmagar whispered, impressed. "Truthfully, I didn't think he had it in him."

"Technically," Lion-O responded, "it wasn't Sho."

"Pardon me?"

"Perhaps, Turmagar, it would be better to show you," Tygra said. "Following Lynx-O's example, Panthro has configured the recording equipment on all of our vehicles to automatically make a record of the Guyver's confrontations in order to garner real-world data on his abilities until a controlled test can be arranged. Per our own laws, Sho is aware of this and approves." The replay began on the main viewer. Unlike the last recorded battle, likewise with the Lunattaks, no one made jokes or cracked wise. Pumyra, however, blushed slightly in embarrassment at the sight of herself dangling helplessly before the Lunattaker's main gun.

"Unbelievable," Turmagar said at length once the recording had finished. "I had no idea his armor was so incredible! You say Sho was, in fact, dead during this battle?"

"That's impossible to determine," Pumyra spoke up. "The damage his brain suffered would indicate that Sho had been murdered by that Enzyme creature. Though I'm unfamilair with human brain structure, I did see first-hand what I could only call total regeneration of the organ."

"In other words, you don't know," Lion-O said.

"That's correct. Tygra and I both inspected Sho visually, finding no sign of injury whatsoever. After council, I'll return to the infirmary to conduct a more thorough scan."

"This brings us to another point," Tygra said. "We have all seen with our own eyes what the Guyver is capable of without Sho in control. The question we must ask ourselves is, what if this happens again?"

"Before that," Pumyra said, seeing the incredulous look on WilyKat's face, "we should examine the exact circumstances regarding Guyver's actions, and how they differed from any behavior we have seen from Sho."

"Seconded," said Panthro.

"Very well. Since you and WilyKat had a much closer vantage point to the... action... please give us your views."

"He saved us!" WilyKat exclaimed.

"As WilyKat noticed," Pumyra began, "the Guyver did not initiate any offensive measure. Its methods were defensive. Violent beyond measure, I grant you, but defensive."

"I noticed that as well," Lion-O offered. "Pumyra's testimony confers with what the unnamed human said about the Guyver's defense mode."

"He did seem to have intimate knowledge of Guyver's functions," Tygra said, "And his words proved true."

"What we must remember," Lynx-O added, "is that what we saw was the Guyver acting on its own. Sho had no control over it at the time."

"And that leads us back to the original point," Tygra said gravely. "If this does happen again, we might not be able to get clear in the thrity seconds required for the control medal to assume operational status. Though he did not say as much, his warning for us not to threaten it makes clear that the control medal does not distinguish friends from enemies."

"Ma-Mutt was remade just for the purpose of taking Sho out," WilyKat argued. "Really, how many natural creatures on Third Earth could do it?"

"We don't know the answer to that," Tygra replied softly. Ominous silence stretched between the gathered, growing thicker as seconds ticked by.

"I can think of none," Turmagar added, mostly to break that silence, "but we Tuskas have not mapped much of this continent beyond Darkside."

"Let me get one thing straight here," WilyKat said, his temper rising. "Are you saying we should kick Sho out because of what happened today?"

"No one's saying that," Panthro replied. "Right now, I'd no more ask him to leave than I'd have invited Slythe for dinner."

"Instead of chasing our tails with what we don't know, " Cheetara said, "why don't review what we do?"

"Such as?"

"He can't be brainwashed and unleashed on us for starters, Tygra," Lion-O answered. "The Lunattaks paid for that scheme, as well."

"They paid the ultimate price for this latest one," Bengali growled. And as far as I'm concerned, they had it coming! he did not say though he could not hide it in his voice.

"I move we table this," WilyKit piped up from beside her brother. "We're getting nowhere."

"Seconded," Pumyra added.

"Moving on," Tygra said, shifting mental gears with a little difficulty.

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So, Chilla thought absently as she stared out at the rising moon, this is the hedquarters of the Mutant Army. She ignored the fading stench of Mutant as she raised the goblet, her fifth, of kirgash to her lips. The steaming brew had at this point no taste whatsoever, merely burning its way to her stomach and further distancing her mind from a truth that refused to fully go away.

They were gone, now. Even the deliterious effects of the booze racing its way through her bloodstream could not dredge up any feelings of sadness and regret. She'd never had much use

for Luna or that hulking Amok she rode about on. TugMug and Red Eye had never held any high esteem in her eyes either. Alluro, useful as he could be when she was hard up for a wild romp, had been merely another presence in her existence. Just another toy like the humans she had enjoyed, however one she did not go so far as to break when bored with him.

The ThunderCats, no doubt, would have taken possession of SkyTomb and their vehicles. For them not to would be complete folly. She was homeless, weaponless, and alone. Which was why she was still naked and drinking her cares away while Grune slumbered on the bed. Had anyone told her that she would one day resort to letting someone screw her in order to survive, she would have scoffed before freezing them on the spot. She would have done so to Grune when he made his proposal if not for the fact that she had seen with her own two eyes how the Guyver, with half its fucking *head* ripped off, had dismembered and then slaughtered Amok. The ThunderCats would never just let her roam about freely, and the prospect of facing their pet monster without serious backup was far from attractive.

Pet, she thought. Hell, that's pretty much what I've let myself become. She gazed over at him, lying on his back and breathing easily. To kill him would take so little effort. At least it would if she didn't need him so badly. It was to survive, she knew, but having to service him like that still demeaned Chilla to no end.

"I know what you're thinking." The sudden deep basso rumble of his voice in the dark startled her in spite of the kirgash she'd consumed. "You want to kill me right now."

"Whatever makes you think that, Grune?" She kept her tone soft, seductive. The alcohol helped in that regard.

"The way you've been glaring at me for the past five minutes, for starters," he replied, moving up to a relaxed sitting position against the headboard. "We Thunderians have excellent night vision.

"That right?" She did not have to pretend to be a sheet or two into the wind as she rose to let the light of the moon play across her tight, blue-tinted body. "Maybe I just wanned more, 'n was pished you were shleepin'."

"I'm wide awake now."

Pathetic, Grune thought as Chilla sauntered over still naked as the day she was born. Or hatched. Or however Lunattaks came into being. He knew full well her pledge to do anything for him to let her on the back of the Skycutter had been made in desperation, and he knew her attempts to seduce him on arrival at the still-incomplete Fortress Plun-Darr had been merely an attempt to get in his good graces more than in his pants.

"I'd have never thought a woman so cold could feel so warm," he purred as Chilla's breasts pressed into his torso and her lips found his neck." It wouldn't hurt to play along for a while, at least. It was still rather fun, and Grune hadn't known a woman since his return to the mortal coil.

"Salot bout me you don' know," she replied drunkenly.

Oh, I know plenty about your kind, he thought as his hands traced her spine. You'll try to kill me the first chance you get. Or, you'll seduce someone into it. That's when I'll end this little charade.

Until then, however, Grune fully intended to enjoy himself.

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It's a good thing my sleep cycle's already shot to hell, Pumyra thought as she studied the results of the medical scanner's latest analysis. The normality of the readout was, perversely, the reason it was so odd. Despite the fact that the scanner was set to maximum sensitivity, it could detect no sign of injury to either Sho's brain or his body. His vitals, while somewhat low, were rock steady. Every result showed only that her patient was in a very deep slumber.

How in Jaga's name can the Guyver *do* that? she wondered, glancing at the deep-freeze where the cell samples from the fight with Lisker were stored. Wounds like the one Sho suffered earlier in the day were uniformly lethal regardless of species. Or, so she had thought. In medical terms, the human was proving to be the exception to practically all the rules. And yet, when the mine had collapsed, he'd run the very real risk of bleeding to death and had required time to heal in the conventional way.

The armor only protects his body while he wears it, she thought as she took a seat at her desk. It protects his mind regardless, but only against actual psychic assault. That explianed how Alluro had managed to hypnotize him and how the Guyver reversed the process...

"... once he summoned it..." she finished aloud. Without it, Sho was as vulnerable as any other human. If he was killed while in his natural form... What would the Guyver do? Nothing? Summon itself? Revert to *its* natural state for another host? The hiss of the door sliding open jostled her from her train of thought and the shadow of someone she didn't expect to see stood in the shaft of light.

"Can't sleep, Kit?" she asked after the young girl entered the infirmary.

"One of those nights," she replied. Pumyra noticed, in the clearest clinical terms, how WilyKit was filling out and blossoming into the woman she would one day be beneath the pajamas she wore. Before long, she and her brother would have to have separate quarters. The would have been split up by now if not for the fact that the Tower of Omens hadn't been designed with housing large groups in mind. It was a wonder that they could all share this space as comfortably as they did.

"Still wired after what happened?"

"I'm pretty much past that," WilyKit said. "It's my brother that's the problem."

"Oh?"

"He's snoring so loud it's like trying to sleep next to the ThunderTank, only without the muffler."

"Is that right?" Pumyra asked around a hearty laugh. "I'm afraid I don't have anything in stock for snoring."

"That's okay," WilyKit said as she leaned against the desk. "Panthro always has a spare mallet or two in the hangar."

"That'll cure it, for sure," Pumyra replied and both of them fell into fits of giggling. WilyKit, once past her good humor, turned her gaze to Sho's slumbering form and Pumyra saw a curious mix of emotions flicker across her face.

"So," she began, "he's gonna be okay?"

"As far as I can tell," Pumyra replied. "He'll miss first light tomorrow, but that's about it."

"Amazing," she said distractedly. "It's kinda like he's invincible."

"I wouldn't go that far," Pumyra said in rebuke, "but he's pretty durable."

"Are you gonna be here all night?"

"I was just about to leave, actually."

"Mind if I... sit here for a little while?"

"Sure," Pumyra replied, grinning. "Just don't stay up too late."

"No problem. See you in the morning."

With that, Pumyra rose and took her leave. As the door shut behind her, Pumyra shook her head. WilyKit's first crush, she realized. Pumyra remembered her first crush, way back when on Thundera, a handsome specimen of the Leopard clan. She had been around WilyKit's age, and he'd been a famous Snarfball champion. Of course, she learned, most every female in the area she'd grown up in had a major crush on him, but at the time she had felt it to be her and her alone.

Though fourteen was a tad late for one, and Sho wasn't Thunderian, Pumyra had to smile at it as she neared the doorway into the room which WilyKit shared with her sibling. Nothing in Thunderian law stated that a couple couldn't involve someone of another race, and in terms of Thunderian men WilyKit's options were no option at all, so it made sense for Sho to be her first crush. Not to mention that he'd saved their lives on more than one occasion.

Just let her down easy, Sho, she thought when she reached the entrance to the twins' quarters.

"Naaahh..." she said before opening the door. As expected, only WilyKat was in there, stone asleep and silent. "Thought so..."

"SNNNXXRRRXXKKK!"

"Or not," she said, shutting the door once again. "Thank goodness Bengali doesn't do that." With another look back at the direction she'd come, Pumyra resumed the trip to her and Bengali's quarters

WilyKit looked at him, sound asleep beneath the sheets of his bed, with a maelstrom of emotions playing within her. Powerful and yet weak. Grown, and yet still close to her own age. Human, and in many ways Thunderian. How much of that insane equation was him, or Guyver, or both?

"I don't know if you can hear me," she said in a whisper, "but I'm glad you came." Sho didn't stir in the slightest at her words. She stared, Sho unresponsive, as he breathed in and breathed out. "I wasn't sure how I felt about you until now. I've never seen anyone give their life for us before. Kinda, anyway." She adjusted the collar of the pajama top she wore. "I guess I wanna say thanks. For being you." She ducked her head closer to his ear. "And for not snoring." With that, WilyKit leapt into the bed just across the small space from his and hammered the pillow into a comfortable shape.

"Ahhhh... Much better..." WilyKit yawned just before sleep claimed her.

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The spasms faded at long last, leaving Agito panting and dry heaving in their wake as the moon began to dip into the west. It had been necessary to take such an enormous risk, he knew, using the Guyver's teleport to reach the ThunderCats and warn them not to accost the wounded Sho. The fact that he had learned how to access that function without summoning the armor itself was the only reason he wasn't dead now, and he hadn't been sure he would survive it anyway.

It just would not have done for Sho to awaken to the realization that the Guyver had killed people he cared for. Again. The psychological shock would have destroyed him, and Agito needed his mind in one piece. He had no particular use for the ThunderCats other than keeping Sho in one place and sane, yet keeping them alive had for a moment become his responsibility.

Too close, he thought as he stared at the puddle of vomit he could barely hold his head above. If Sho doesn't recover his memory soon...

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He had managed to slip away unnoticed just as the first rays of the sun were bathing Third Earth, and so much the better for it as far as he was concerned. This was it. The final straw. As memories from the long-distant past came up from the depths of his mind like acidic bile, he had made his exit from the Tower of Omens and the lives of the ThunderCats. Perhaps it was cowardly of him, not even facing up to what he had done...

No. What the Guyver had done.

Does it matter? he asked himself as he set down among the charred and blackened ruination that had once been the Treetop Kingdom. The home of the late Willa. With the armor's enhanced sight, he picked out pieces of knives, blackened arrowheads, even shattered fragments of bone that had once been part of living, breathing people. Women, men, children...

Do you see this? Sho asked, forcing his thoughts into the control medal. Do you see what you've started? Do you even care, you son of a bitch?!

Silence...

Sho tread gingerly across the scorched earth, his feet crunching the burned-out husks of trees, and would have shed tears if the armor would have allowed it. He tried to envision how the Treetop Kingdom had looked when he had first awakened and, disturbingly, found he could not clearly recall. So much had happened so fast that... what? In the rush of blowing things up and dismembering enemies, he'd simply forgotten how lovely (if somewhat peculiar) a place it had been? He thought then of Willa, the shape of her body, the cascade of midnight hair...

Nice one, Sho, he thought with a healthy dose of disgust. She helped you, and you're remembering how hot she was.

"I'm sorry," he whispered into the growing day. "I never meant for this to happen. All of you should still be here, and I should've stayed... wherever the hell I was before I came here.

"None of you should be dead now. Oh, God, I'm so sorry..." Sho lingered a moment longer to further survey the senseless destruction before commanding the gravity controller to lift him skyward as fast as it could. He charged off in a direction chosen at random, refusing to visit the ruins of Cat's Lair as he had first thought to. He knew how much they had suffered because of him, even seen it first hand. Sho needed no further reminders of it.

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Her brother conspicusously absent, WilyKit paced about the grounds of the Tower of Omens in search of someone she knew she wouldn't find there. Still, she kept scanning the sky in expectance of him to appear. Sho's disappearance bothered her more than she cared to admit if only for the questions she'd faced on waking up that morning.

She had entered the infirmary mainly in search of a quiet place to sleep. Such had been happening more frequently as WilyKat's snoring grew steadily louder. She ended up explaining as much, yet the other ThunderCats looked at each other as though there had been another explanation. True, she was curious about him, but they seemed to think she had other feelings for Sho.

Not that he isn't cute or anything, she thought as she watched Turmagar's men performing drills. But, why would he just run off like this?

Did he somehow remember what the control medal did? There was no telling, at least without him present to verify. Maybe he just needed to be alone for awhile. WilyKit could relate to that. Having spent so much time in close proximity with WilyKat, she knew what it was like to seek solitude once in a while.

Pumyra looked up from her station in the infirmary and into the eyes of Cheetara sitting across from her. The two women simply stared at each other for a moment, each waiting for the other to speak.

"Is something wrong?" Cheetara asked, taking the initiative.

"No," she replied. Though trying for mild, she came off as awkward. There was something wrong, alright, and only after the action was over had it made itself known.

"I'll take that as a yes." Cheetara reached across the desk and took Pumyra's right hand in both of hers. "Talk to me. What is it?" Pumyra tried to force the words out of her throat, yet they stubbornly refused to pass. "Does it involve Sho?" Cheetara asked, meaning the actions of the Guyver when he had lost control over the armor.

"No, not that. And not that's he's taken off without a word, either."

"What happened to you in SkyTomb?"

"Nothing I haven't already said in council."

"There's something you haven't said," Cheetara replied, gently stroking Pumyra's hand. "Did the Lunattaks do something to you in there? Aside from Chilla, that is."

"Other than drag Kat and I around like luggage and leave us in a deathtrap, you mean?! I'm sorry," she said on seeing Cheetara's eyes widening. "It's just that... it should be over, but... I know I'm still green when it comes to being a ThunderCat. I knew the risks that came with being named..." Pumyra paused, the moment having been reached. "It was in the jungle, when Dyme first captured me." Cheetara remained silent and Pumyra tried to draw reassurance from them. "I saw WilyKat strung up in the trees, and when that monster disarmed me... he... he fondled me."

"Pumyra..."

"It's not the first time someone's copped a feel from me," she added in explanation. "Truth be told, I'm surprised I don't have swollen knuckles from the men I've had to slug for doing just that. It's just that... I was so certain that Dyme was going to... you know... rape me." She said the last in a small voice, humiliated at the memory. Cheetara's grasp grew more firm, the fingers of one hand intwining with Pumyra's own.

"All I could think about..." At this point the tears started and she was utterly powerless to stop them. "All I could think about was WilyKat seeing something that horrid. I... I offered myself to Dyme." There. It was out. At the sound of a chair skidding across the floor, Pumyra looked up to

see Cheetara circle about the corner of the desk and crouch at her side. The Cheetah's arms wrapped about her shoulders, a hand holding Pumyra's head to Cheetara's shoulders. "It was... it was the only thing I could think of! I..."

"If you're thinking anyone'll condemn you, think again," Cheetara said, lovingly stroking Pumyra's hair. "You made the only play you could." Cheetara pulled back, staring directly into Pumyra's eyes. "We're ThunderCats, no matter how much experience we have under our belts. There are times when we're faced with compromising positions and extremely difficult choices. The choice you faced, it was one of the hardest any of us could have, man or woman."

"I know."

"Did Dyme..."

"No. Afterward, he said only that he couldn't bear to stop me, and then I was knocked out."

"Thank Heaven for small favors," Cheetara said, clearly relieved.

"But still, I can't help but ask myself what I would have done if he'd taken me up on it? Or worse, if he still didn't let WilyKat go? Or..."

"Stop it," Cheetara said firmly. "It's only natural to question yourself after something like that, even I do it. But, I learned a long time ago that once you start it can be hard as hell to stop. If you keep fretting over the past, you'll only drive yourself insane. And, if Dyme had taken advantage of it, you would still have been the better one. The braver one."

"Braver one?" It was Cheetara's turn to pause, a haunted expression lingering on her face.

Cheetara looked at the other woman, and knew she finally had to share this pain. Even though Lord Claudis and Lady Leona had helped a great deal, she had never before related the full tale to another. Here in the infirmary of the Tower of Omens, over fifteen years and an incalculable distance from where Thundera once graced the stars, sat someone else who had been faced with this, and needed the guidance of someone who'd been there.

And had made a different choice. Wordlessly, she guided Pumyra over to one of the empty beds and sat them both on the edge while bracing herself for what had to be done.

"Cheetara? What are you...?"

"I'd been a ThunderCat for only a year when I met him," Cheetara began, her eyes staring seemingly into the past. "Before Cougrix, I never believed in love at first sight. But, there I was, looking at him in all his glory in the royal court and it took all I had not to show what I was feeling. Quite a chore when you're naked, let me tell you." The Nobility only walked about nude in the Cat's Lair, she didn't need to explain. Out and about or in battle, they were fully clothed.

"It wasn't just the sight of him, either. More than his body, that face, the scent... he just seemed to exude this feeling of confidence. Cougrix was new, but he spoke and moved as though he were an old hand at the inner workings of Cat's Lair and Thunderian politics. And we had been recruited as warriors, not lawmakers."

"Cougrix, he felt the same?"

"So he told me when we finally worked up the nerve to admit our feelings for eachother. Six months of sidelong glances when we thought no one was looking, nervous attempts to start conversations, missions into the hinterlands of Thundera chasing down criminals and scouting Mutant landing sites... I'll never forget the night he told me he was in love with me."

"What happened? What did he say?"

"Nothing, at first. We were on the observation platform atop the Lair, when he pulls a telma orchid from behind his back and starts kissing me." She looked at Pumyra at this and chuckled at her wide-eyed expression. "I told you he was confident. When he pulled back, he had the most frightened look on his face and he told me that he'd wanted to do that since the second he saw me. Well, I told him that he just beat me to the punch, and he just... lit up all over. From there, well, I think you can figure out the rest."

"So, what happened to Cougrix? Did you two..."

"That," Cheetara replied, "is the point of this story." She took several deep breaths, preparing to delve into one of the most painful episodes of her life. "We'd been together a couple of months when we were chosen for a mission in the Nim-Kayla expanse. Royal Intelligence had information that a small Mutant scout force had landed not long before and had been using the Expanse as a base of operations. Our job had been to confirm Mutant presence and numbers so a strike force could put an end to them.

"We made our way into the Expanse, moving so silently I could have sworn I could hear our hearts beating. It turned out that R.I. had been correct about the Mutants, but not that it was a scout party. I managed to activate my emergency transponder before Ratar-O captured us."

"Ratar-O? I've only heard stories about that one, and none of them good!"

"Many of those are true. Ratar-O had been sent to covertly organize a platform from which the armies of Plun-Darr could strike at the capital. His guard force had managed to capture us, then dragged us in chains to Ratar-O's ship, the Rat-Star." Here she had to pause, the pain of it all still sharp and sanguine. In a shaky voice, Cheetara continued.

"Ratar-O had separated us. My arms were bound behind me, and he had entered my cell before I could begin to free myself. And then he... Ratar-O pulled out his member and ordered me to service it."

"Bastard..."

"Oh, he was at that. Of course I refused. Vehemently, at that. I was a ThunderCat, a warrior, pride of my clan and my family. And I was so, so arrogant. Ratar-O hadn't bothered binding my legs, and after managing to kick him in that organ he'd wanted to use on me, I got all of two steps beyond the door before a party of guards sprang on me."

"Cheetara..." Pumyra's hand appeared on her own, and Cheetara took some measure of comfort from the gesture.

"I fought as hard as I could, but there were six of them and they wasted no time in pawing at me, groping me... Ratar-O rose up from the floor and the look in his eye when he brandished those sai, I thought for sure that my number was up. For so long after, I wished it had been.

"Ratar-O snarled at me that I would regret what I'd done to him. I was so outraged, so insulted, I wasted no time in telling him what I thought of Plun-Darr, the Rat Clan, his men, and I might have made some rude remarks regarding his parentage and the size of his manhood. Ratar-O... perhaps I should show you." Releasing Pumyra's hand, Cheetara loosened the top of her leotard and lowered it to her waist. She turned to Pumyra and indicated the faded x-shaped scar just below her breasts.

"He did that to you?" Pumyra asked, shocked.

"Every day it's been a reminder," Cheetara replied as she pulled her uniform back up and re-centered her insignia. "After cutting me, Ratar-O ordered his men to bind my legs and gag me. Once they finished, he had them carry me into another cell, where I saw Cougrix. His wrists were secured to the ceiling by shackles which hung down only enough for his toes to touch the floor."

"Cheetara," Pumyra began, "you don't have to..."

"Yes. I do." Cheetara was holding back the tears with physical effort, now. "I won't tell you the specifics, I wouldn't want that to haunt *your* nightmares as well as mine. Suffice to say that, while Ratar-O was tormenting Cougrix, he kept mocking my inability to say anything to stop him. Pumyra, at that moment, I would have given him any part of my body he wanted just to make him leave Cougrix alone. The more I screamed into the gag, the more Ratar-O kept saying he couldn't hear me, that I... I had to speak up if I wanted to be heard... that...."

"Stop it, Cheetara. Don't do this to yourself!"

"I'm almost done. When it was over, Ratar-O stared me right in the eye and said I could have prevented it all, told me to enjoy what I'd purchased with my pride. I looked up at Cougrix, and after the Mutants left, he told me that I'd done the right thing. His last words to me were that he loved me." Cheetara could not continue for several moments as the horrid recollections came on their own now that the plug had been removed. Hot, noxious tears flowed freely as Cougrix's final words echoed relentlessly.

(Ya did good, Cheetie. *Never*.... give in....

I.... Love. Youuuu.....)

"I had no idea..." Pumyra's stunned voice came as the tide of agony began to recede.

"I don't clearly remember the rescue party's attack," Cheetara said once she could trust her voice to remain steady. "But I do know that, before I recognized the shadow above me as Panthro, the first thing I said when the cloth was removed was to kill me and be done with it. For so long, I was dead inside."

"I never knew just how strong you really are, Cheetara," Pumyra said, her voice soft yet awed. "I guess I got off pretty easy."

"No," she replied, draping an arm about the other woman's shoulders. "In a situation like that, there's no getting off easy. There's only getting out alive."

"Are you saying that if you'd done what I did, then..."

"I'm not. Even if I'd submitted to Ratar-O, that was no guarantee for Cougrix. I know that now, but then? It was a question I asked myself over and over again, day in and day out. I kept wishing I could somehow go back to that moment, make the other choice."

"You seem to have recovered," Pumyra said, clearly abashed.

"Not entirely. Once in a while I'll catch myself thinking about Cougrix, or I'll believe I caught his scent or heard his voice. And sometimes, I can still hear his screams. Something like that changes you. If it weren't for the ThunderCats, and Lady Leona, I would never have come so far. When I saw what Grune did to Lion-O, for a brief moment, I was twenty years old again and all that happened all over again. That's why I was such a total wreck afterward. Also, that's why I will always be grateful to you and Tygra for saving him."

"This'll stay between us," Pumyra promised, "don't worry."

"Thank you." At that, Cheetara embraced the younger woman, and felt a great weight slide from her heart a little. Perhaps one day, she would tell Lion-O this story. Perhaps.

==========

Lion-O wanted the full story as the ThunderTank rumbled across the Desert of Sinking Sands. He adjusted the vehicle's trajectory with ease born of much practice as the rolling dunes slid steadily past.

He had to know if Mumm-Ra was truly dead. The single worst enemy the ThunderCats had ever faced having met his end seemed too good to be true, and be damned if he'd move on that assumption a second time.

"I'm not sure if this is a good idea, Lion-O," Tygra said from his right.

"When we rescued our countrymen from Fire Rock Mountain," he began, "we assumed Mumm-Ra to be dead thanks to his attempt to seize the Star of Thundera's power for himself. Thanks to that, we ended up with the Lunattaks. I won't take that kind of chance again."

"And if he isn't?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we get to it. Either way, given everything that's happened lately, I don't want to be blindsided with another threat he could pull out from his cloak to harrass us."

"If he is dead, then?"

"You won't see me mourning, that's for sure." They continued on in silence for a time, the desert seeming to stretch into infinity as the sun reached its zenith above. "I'll bet Panthro's having a blast."

"You didn't hear this from me," Tygra began in a conspiratory tone, "but the thought of looking under SkyTomb's hood had him happy as Snarf in a candyfruit grotto."

"I can believe it!" Lion-O hooted once he was done roaring in laughter. If it involved technology, one could expect Panthro to waste no time in dismantling it to see how it worked. Also, one could expect him to re-work what he found into something the ThunderCats could use. His engineering prowess had been responsible for their advanced technology on this galactic backwater known as Third Earth.

"Something's not right," Lion-O said as they neared the coordinates of the Black Pyramid. "The smell's wrong."

"I noticed that, as well," Tygra replied as Lion-O slowed the ThunderTank to a crawl. The scent of ozone from the constant lightning clouds was consipcuously absent as were any trace of said clouds. As the ThunderTank crept along, the two could not help but notice that the feel of lingering evil which always seemed to nag the edges of one's mind in the presence of such darkness was likewise absent.

"It's gone," Tygra said unnecessarily. "As though the Black Pyramid never fouled this stretch of Third Earth."

"It looks like Sho did it," Lion-O said in amazement when they reached the spot Mumm-Ra's unholy tomb once occupied. "I can't believe it."

"Sho," Tygra began, "didn't do this. Guyver did."

"And we're all better off for it. If this keeps up, that kid's gonna put us out of a job."

"You don't hear me complaining," Tygra replied. "Mumm-Ra and the Lunattaks both."

"Not all of them," Lion-O said as he plotted a course back to the Tower. "Even without SkyTomb and all its gadgets, Chilla can still cause plenty of trouble on her own. Not to mention that she's probably sided with the Mutant Army, wherever the hell they are.

"Besides," he contiued, "evil as pure as Mumm-Ra's never truly dies. It may take a long time, but I'm positive he'll be back."

"Then let's use the time we've been bought," Tygra said.

"Yes. We'll redouble our efforts to find the Mutants. We've got one last war to fight, Tygra," Lion-O said as the ThunderTank retraced its route, "let's have done with it and maybe we can finally enjoy some peace."

"I agree. Wholeheartedly."

==========

A measure of peace, as he trod aimlessly through the gloom he had landed in several hours before, was all Sho wanted as the memory of the horror Guyver had committed so long ago replayed itself with no indication of relenting. He kept seeing the arm on the ground, the earth scorched by the megasmasher...

"Stop it," he commanded himself, though his voice was weak and weary. The atrocity in his past, coupled with what he could only imagine the triple-damned Guyver had done just the day before, dragged at his every step. His lack of food since awakening seemed insignificant next to the torrential whirlwind in his mind.

So many dead. Then and now. Why? What higher power deemed that he be a messenger of destruction? What had he done to deserve such a life? What had the ThunderCats done to deserve his shadow above them?

He knew he should return to the Tower, answer for what the Guyver had done, yet he just couldn't bring himself to do so.

Look at me, Sho thought, the world's oldest and most powerful coward. I don't deserve their friendship.

Little did Sho realize that he would be compelled to return in only moments, and that he would not be alone.

"What is that thing?" Myrlha managed between gasps, her bare feet stomping the ground and legs pistoning for all they were worth.

"A bone serpent!" Salvador replied from his place on her back. "I didn't know any were left!" However many were still alive mattered little next to the fact that one wanted to make them a snack. Myrlha kept running, breath coming in gasps and a painful stitch forming in her side.

Salvador had told her of the dangers present in Darkside, and that the other two routes around it were unadvisable. Fire Rock Mountain, from the way he'd described it, she could believe but the Field of Chains seemed absolutely ridiculous.

Thundrainium pits, or having to dodge a myriad of enchanted chains. Either would be preferable to becoming a monster's next meal.

The rumbling of the massive snake's body grew closer as the two of them rounded another bend...

And found themselves faced with a sheer wall reaching up at least forty feet.

"No..." she said, desperately trying for a handhold. Nothing even approaching viable presented itself as frustration merged with blooming despair. "We came so far..."

"We did our best, Myrlha," Salvador said as he eased off of her back. "It just wasn't enough."

"It can't end like this!" she wailed as the bone serpent drew closer. The massive snake raised itself up on coming within range, jagged and wickedly sharp plates of bone covering its back and adorning its head like a terrible helmet. A pair of slitted, malevolent eyes glared out at them from beneath its calcified mask, alive with cruel intelligence. With an enraged roar, Myrlha picked up the nearest projectile she could find, a stone roughly the size of her fist, and let it fly to bounce harmlessly off of the natural armor.

What the hell was that? Sho thought as he heard the shout. Alarmed, he neared the edge of a nearby ravine and lurched in utter shock of what he saw. The bone-encrusted serpent was facing down two individuals, one tall and lithe and the other short and stocky, and the end of what he realized was a box canyon was at their backs.

Pretty obvious what's going on here, he thought with a resigned sigh. He had to help them, he couldn't just turn his back, and to do so he needed to transform.

"Guyver!" He waited, expectantly, yet nothing happened.

"Guyver!" he tried again, still with no success. Confused, Sho inspected himself to determine the problem.

"GUYVER!" Volume wasn't the issue as the two unknown people below began to cry out for help from anyone, anywhere.

What the hell's wrong with you? Sho demanded of the disobedient armor. Why won't you come to me?!

(The problem is not the Guyver,) the voice he hadn't heard in so long spoke in his mind. (The problem is you.)

(Me?!) Sho watched in growing horror as the strange, enormous snake began to inch closer to the helpless duo.

(In your fear of what it has done, you sealed it away. You remember what happened...)

(I do. I lost it then, too.)

(Yes. You must regain the power!)

(I...)

(The only one who has the power to save those two is you. If they die because you refuse to use it, then their blood is on your hands! Then you truly are a monster, a murderer!)

(How did I get it back last time?)

(You already know. Remember, Sho. Remember why you fought back then! Even after X-Day, after the fall, you fought on! Remember why you did!)

I won't run away again... The memory returned, filling Sho with determination that burned like the heart of a star and a resolve harder than the most tempered metals.

I won't run away...

I won't run away...

"I won't run away..." The connection returned and, had he a mirror at hand, he would have noticed his eyes glowing a deep and brilliant blue. The word burst from his lips as his feet parted company with the edge of the canyon.

Myrlha wanted to scream at the unfairness of it all as the bone serpent prepared its coiled muscles to strike. She forced her eyes to remain open for the last atrocity of her life. If she was to die a failure, then she would at least die a brave one.

"GUUUYYYYYVEEEERRRR!!!!!!!" The enraged roar shattered the moment, followed immediately by a massive explosion of displaced air that distracted even the bone serpent before them. As one, all three looked skyward to see the tumbling form change within a spherical barrier of energy. Teal armor appeared about it, leaving something eerily similar to the armor she knew Lisker possessed.

"Is that...?" The strange man, his transformation apparently complete, changed his direction so quickly that when his armored foot slammed into the bone serpent's protective outer cover the sound of it was as a thunderclap.

"Sho!" Salvador cried out in joy as the bone serpent reeled from the insanely hard impact. Sho rebounded from his assault, somersaulting twice before landing in a crouch.

"Stay behind me!" he exclaimed, his voice strangely distorted. The bone serpent shook its head, chips of armor flaking off of it, before striking. It's speed was well in excess of its size, yet Sho appeared to be quicker as he caught the upper and lower jaws in his right and left hands respectively.

It only moved him a few inches! Myrlha thought in stunned amazement. So this is the one who's helping the ThunderCats! I can see why they survived so long!

This thing's freakin' TOUGH! Sho struggled to hold the writhing creature at bay as he held its jaws apart. Bio-boosted power battled against mutated muscle as each tried to gain advantage over the other.

Bone plates on this thing're pretty thick, he thought as the sensor medals shifted about. If worse comes to worst, I have to break out the big guns. He glanced inside its gaping maw at the pink tissue that lined it and fired the head beam into the roof. Sho was rewarded with the bone serpent roaring and squealing in surprised pain and immediately relenting its assault.

From the way it's thrashing... Sho cut off that thought, leaping back to grab the two would-be victims and leaping upward with all his might just before the enormous growth of bone at the tip of its tail carved a trench where they had stood only a moment before.

"How in the...?" the woman asked once he set them down well away from the canyon's edge. "How did you do that?"

"That's kind of... a... hey, you're a ThunderCat, aren't you?"

"I'm Thunderian, but not one of the Nobility." Sho could practically hear the capital "N" she put at the front of that word. "My name's Myrlha." Sho looked at her, stricken. What looked like a rolled-up coat covered her modest breasts, scraps of fabric covering the junction of her toned legs. Her eyes caught his, her muted brown hair billowing in the breeze. Beneath the layers of dust and her ragged condition, he saw a beautiful woman.

Wow... Sho thought. She's wonderful! Tearing his eyes from her with considerable effort, he spotted the familiar form of Salvador next to her. His coat was missing, said article adorning Myrlha's torso, he realized.

"Salvador! What happened?"

"Dyme sacked our village and took many of us to work on the new Mutant stronghold. Myrlha and I escaped over a month ago. We've been trying to get to the Tower of Omens."

"And we almost ended up snake food," Myrlha added. "Thank you. For the rescue, I mean."

"You're... I don't believe this!" he shouted when the sensor medals snatched backward. Not wasting a moment, he wrapped his arms about the two of them and launched himself forward just before the bone serpent landed where they had been. "Does this thing give up?!"

"Bone serpents never stop chasing their prey," Salvador replied as Sho landed and turned about. "You can't just scare them off!" Sho studied the enormous reptile as it coiled again. Deciding that perhaps he could do what Salvador said couldn't be done, he activated the sonic buster.

The bone serpent thrashed about wildly as the bone plates atop its head splintered and cracked under the sonic assault, yet showed no signs of having its mind changed about the evening's meal. Sho relented, not wishing to waste any more power on a tactic that had been just proven ineffective. In an instant, the battered reptile coiled and launched itself directly at him. Sho charged forward as he extended the sonic sword on his right arm, ducking beneath the striking snake and feeling it pierce flesh up to the hilt. Its momentum coupled with his own served to carry the blade along the entirety of its length before the now-dead creature slid to a stop at the end of a trail of gore.

"Looks like this one's not gonna chase us anymore," Myrlha said with what seemed to be fear.

"It didn't leave me a lot of options," Sho said defensively.

"Hey, I'm not knocking you," she replied with a smile. "From what I've seen of Third Earth, the natural order on this planet is survival of the meanest."

"You two said you're headed to the Tower, right? How about I give you a lift?"

"Where's your vehicle?" Myrlha asked, looking about in confusion.

"Sho doesn't exactly need one," Salvador told her. "Sho, we'd greatly appreciate it."

"Sure. Grab on." Salvador's diminutive form sat in the crutch of his left arm with his right wrapped about Myrlha's waist. As she held onto him, Sho felt that he wouldn't mind if she held him that way in his human form...

STOP IT! he chided himself. You just met her, you can't think of her that way!

"Hold on tight, you two," he said before bending at the knees and leaping upward. As they sailed skyward, Sho activated the gravity controller and adjusted their course to the Tower of Omens. He supposed he could have just teleported them, but he didn't know the risks of bringing along more than one person.

Besides, he thought at the feel of Myrlha pressed against him, this isn't so bad.

"Either this is the longest jump in history," Myrlha said, "or we're flying somehow." Several wracking coughs burst from her mouth then. Sho gazed at her, seeing the aura of her seriously diminished.

"We're flying," Sho replied, concerned.

"How?!"

"The gravity controller at my waist," he said. "Just don't ask me how it works."

Gravity controller?! she thought, amazed as she stared at the innocuous metal orb he had mentioned. Just how powerful are you, anyway?

He felt so warm, she realized. Salvador had told her Sho was human and that the armor merged with him when summoned, yet he hadn't known much else about the Guyver. Pressed into his masculine form, the Guyver itself didn't feel like any armor plating she'd ever encountered. It felt... alive.

I wonder what you look like beneath this thing, she thought with a flush coloring her cheeks. She tore her thoughts away from him as she sudied the ground racing below her tired and aching feet. They'd made it. After a month of endless walking, foraging for food, avoiding human settlements due to what Salvador had told her of humans from beyond Darkside, and almost being killed by a bone serpent, they were being flown to the ThunderCats by one of their allies. The illness she'd been holding at bay seemed irrelevant at this point. Even if she'd died, so long as she could get the ThunderCats to rescue the others, it was worth each labored breath.

Hold on, everyone. Freedom's coming!

==========

"I'm sorry I can't do anything more for the pain," he said as he applied the bandage just below her tan breasts. She remained silent as he worked, shivering in terror that each second may be her last. Oswald Lisker forced a calm expression on his face to hide his rage at what those four Mutants had the audacity to attempt in his absence.

He had returned to the sound of a female screaming in horror, and had located the source at once from above. He'd landed just behind four Mutant apes who had stood in a circle around a nude and frightened Maria. Her clothes had been scattered about in tattered shreds, leaving her no modesty other than her arms as they leered and grunted in anticipation.

Killing them had been an unparalleled pleasure.

"You can speak to me, you know," he said as he finished changing the bandage on her torso and proceeded to unwrap the one about her upper leg. "I know some of you speak my language."

"Please be gentle," she replied in a meek, subdued voice. "I won't stop you, just don't hurt me like they did."

"I'd never do to you what they did," he replied, recalling with a healthy dose of shame what he'd once considered doing to Cheetara before he could stop himself. "At least I was able to make them pay for it. I wish I could have gotten back sooner. I could have stopped them."

"You did." Maria winced slightly as Lisker applied the new bandage.

"Really?"

"They hadn't started yet." She paused, looking up at him in a mixture of fear, bewilderment, and something he couldn't quite identify. Maria swallowed audibly before speaking again. "Thank you for stopping them."

"Of course," he replied, greatly relieved that those damnable apes hadn't gotten about to raping her yet when he'd arrived. Poor little thing wouldn't have survived that, he thought. "None of you should be here. Not like this."

"We are," she said, resigned. "Why are you doing this for me?"

"Because..." Lisker stopped, unsure of what he should say. She was a slave - said fact which angered him to no end - and she looked at him as one of those with the whips.

How else do you see me, lying on my bed like this? he silently asked her.

"Never mind," he settled with, knowing it was inadequate. Getting up, Lisker moved to the other side of the bed so he could start on her other leg. "Nothing's broken, at least. It's a wonder how there aren't any kind of painkillers here."

"It's not bad," Maria said before a sharp gasp gave lie to her words. "Why did you kill them?"

"They deserved it for what they were doing to you."

"That still doesn't make it right." She flinched then, as if expecting a blow for being an uppity slave.

"If I hadn't, then they would have waited until I wasn't around again. No one deserves to be hurt like you almost were. That's how brutes like these Mutants work. Once I beat one of them down, they waited until I was gone to take it out on someone who couldn't fight back. I guess, in a way, I'm responsible for it."

"You're strange, Master Lisker."

"Just Lisker. I'm not your master. There, just a couple more and we're done for tonight."

"I'm still a slave," Maria said, her tone still resigned. "I don't have the power to change that."

"Even so," Lisker replied, "that doesn't make taking advantage of you right." I'm getting sucked into a damn moral debate, he relized with a rueful shake of his head. Morality wasn't something he'd devoted much thought to.

"Too bad the Mutants don't think that."

"Truth be told," he said, leaning close to her ear, "I don't believe they think much, period." Her lips twitched slightly before she could swallow the laughter.

"You're nicer than the others."

"I'm not nice," he replied. "I've done some pretty bad things in my life. Things I'm not too proud of right now."

"If you didn't have any goodness, would you be doing this?" Lisker was brought up short by that.

"I... I guess not..." he managed at length, her unbandaged right arm cradled in his hands. "Anyway, your English is excellent."

"Senor Salvador taught me," she replied. "He's travelled a lot."

"Has he now?" There was a certain irony in Maria's words she didn't even know existed. On his way back, he spotted the hiding forms of two people he knew to be missing from the site and had been presumed dead. He'd continued on, not bothering with them.

He continued bandaging Maria's battered form in silence. She was tall for one of those Wollos, and had she been human he would have said she was well built to boot. Finished, Lisker rose from the bed and inspected his handiwork.

She probably thinks I'm sizing her up like a piece of meat, he thought with a twinge of shame. Not as though I can help what they did to her dress.

"That oughtta do it," he said, turning to fetch his Armani jacket for her to wear. Three thousand dollar garment, and it was shot to hell. Lisker seriously doubted he'd find a menswear store on this Third Earth place. Gently, he helped her up from the bed and slide the coat over her downy covering of fur. "Sleep well, Maria." Her modesty restored, he eased her back onto the uncomfortable bed. Still, it was better than the unyeilding cots the others slept on.

"Lisker," she said, nervous now. "If you wish for me as a consort, you don't have to seduce me."

"I'm not seducing you," he replied.

"Please let me heal before you take me," she pleaded in a small voice.

"Maria," he said, becoming irritated, "I'm not going to force myself on you, end of story. I'm not that kind of a bastard." With that, he doused the lights in the bedchamber and went into the anteroom beyond.

Alone in the new darkness and sore all over, the Wollo Maria lay in the scent of Oswald Lisker which permeated the garment covering her. She had no clue what to think of the human, he was so unlike any other of his race she had ever encountered. He had killed those Mutants without a trace of mercy (and though she wouldn't admit it, she took a savage satisfaction at the sight) yet

he was so tender when dressing her wounds. He looked at her nakedness not with lust or passion, merely acknowledging the fact of it as he treated her. His actions backed up his claims that he was not about to rape her.

Is he a good man or an evil one? Maria asked herself as she closed her eyes. He killed, and yet he's caring for me. He doesn't use his power to free us, yet he intimidates the Mutants into beating us less. How confusing! In fact, he hadn't even let his gaze linger over her sex when he'd had her legs apart while applying the bandages. How many men under any circumstances could have managed that?!

Even more confusing was that, when she had pleaded with him to let her heal first, it hadn't been out of submission. She actually wouldn't have minded. What was it about him? So much good and so much evil in one man.

How torn you must be, Oswald Lisker, Maria thought.

Stretched out on the bench in the center of the spartan main area, Lisker let his mind turn over the most recent events. Mumm-Ra had tried to double-cross him, and as angry as he was over that, Lisker had to admit that it had been a learning experience. Who knew the Guyver was capable of such a thing?! He certainly hadn't, and the knowledge bolstered his own confidence.

We Guyvers are as close to invincible as anyone can come, he realized with a satisfied smile. Regardless of whatever weapons the Mutant Army possessed, they couldn't kill him. They simply lacked the power.

Power....

He had the power to raze this loathsome operation to the ground single-handedly. Some slaves would die in the process, but there was a term for them. Acceptable losses.

Truly?

Lisker's smile inverted itself at that thought. Why not ensure that all of them escaped? Because it was impossible, that was why. Or was it? Lisker thought back to the return trip and the sight of two slaves, one of them having been named by Maria just moments ago, attempting to hide from him.

They're trying to get to those ThunderCat people, he reasoned. And, should they succeed, Those cat people would come running especially once they learned others of their kind were here. And, he knew, they'd come with fangs bared and weapons primed.

They'll bring reinforcements, he thought. They'll bring the kid.

He thought about Sho Fukamachi, and somehow Maria's words about the goodness in him came to the fore. The Guyver had given him a second lease on life, and the world was far different

than the one he had known. Could he start over? Could he have a new life on Third Earth? The image of Sho's lunging punch which had ended his life the first time came back to him unbidden.

If that's gonna happen, Lisker thought, that little loose end has to be tied up first. And, before that, this little setup had to be destroyed...

It came to him, then, how exactly he could ensure that all the enslaved people in this shitpit could escape with their lives. He had to play it exactly right, but maneuvers like this were of little challenge to him.

Besides, he owed Mumm-Ra for betraying him.

==========

Lion-O knew that sometimes, people just needed to be alone. After the incident with Tashii and the Doomgaze, he had found himself returning to those strange stones so he could think about Thundera in solitude. He had no idea how much - if any - of what the Guyver had done he remembered, but he had to have known that something happened. It had to be a terrible shock to him. As such, Lion-O hadn't had anyone depart to search for him. Even if he had, Sho would have been nearly impossible to find given how mobile he was with the Guyver. He did know that Sho had been to the ruins of the Treetop Kingdom, via a Warrior Maiden survivor who had called in on returning to their camp and wished to know if there were any threats in the area.

People are coming to see him as a warrior, he thought. Who could blame them? Even the ThunderCats thought of him that way, as well as a friend.

"I have a contact," Lynx-O said as his fingers flew over the braille board. "Vector three-nine-zero, speed one-twenty miles per hour."

"Aerial?" Lion-O asked.

"Correct. It is headed directly for us. I have identified it as Sho."

"Good." He was hoping Sho wouldn't make a night of it. If he'd been gone too long, they'd have had to search for him. The one thing no one could afford to deal with was Sho in an unbalanced state of mind. Lion-O hated having to think that, but there was no getting around the power he possessed.

"I am picking up two additional life-forms alongside him," Lynx-O said, jarring him from his train of thought.

"He really should ask before inviting friends over," WilyKit joked from his left.

"Any read on them?" Lion-O asked, ignoring her fresh remark.

"Unclear... I have it. One is a Wollo. The other... Stars above!"

"What?"

"The other is Thunderian!" Shocked silence reigned for a moment at the elder's statement.

"So, did he capture Grune and decide to give a Wollo a lift at the same time?"

"Bro, don't make me smack you..."

"I have confirmed that the Thunderian reading is not Grune. In fact, it is female."

"Cheetara, Pumyra, this is Lion-O. Check in, please."

"Cheetara here. I'm in SkyTomb helping Panthro and Tygra catalog the equipment."

"Pumyra responding. I'm treating a Tuska for a sprained wrist."

"You know where *I* am," WilyKit added.

"When that kid goes wandering off, he doesn't play around," Lion-O said. "ThunderCats, assemble before the Tower entrance. Sho's on his way back, and he's got some company for us."

"Panthro here," his basso voice immediately replied. "Something chasing him?"

"It seems," Lynx-O said, "that he has found another survivor of Thundera."

"We're on our way!"

"Wonder what kind of explanation he's got for this?!" WilyKat asked.

"I'll bet it's a real doozy!" his sister added.

"And I can't wait to heart it," Lion-O finished as the four ThunderCats made their hurried way outside.

"What in God's Name is SkyTomb doing here?" Salvador practically shrieked at the sight of the two arcologies.

"That may be here, but I'm sure the Lunattaks aren't." This was it, he thought as he gently set down. They were gathered, those that were left, staring in open-mouthed shock. Cheetara. Pumyra. Panthro. Tygra. Snarfer and Snarf. No sign of Lion-O, WilyKat, WilyKit, or Lynx-O. He released Salvador and Myrlha and cursed himself for allowing thoughts of a romantic nature to enter his head. After what he'd done, she would spit on him. And he would not run.

"Sho," Panthro began.

"I won't run away, Panthro, and I'll accept whatever punishment you have for me. I'll be on top of the Tower when you're ready." With that, Sho took off like a rocket to settle gently on the roof just before the Cat's Eye.

"What in Jaga's name was *that* about?" Tygra asked, utterly puzzled.

"My name is Myrlha, Honored ThunderCats, of the Cougar Clan," the woman said, an arm across her barely covered chest and a slight bow. "Salvador and I have escaped the Mutant Army's slave pens and journeyed here to find you."

"You don't know how glad we are to see you," Lion-O said as he led the other ThunderCats into the rapidly falling night.

"M'lord Lion-O," Myrlha said, repeating the salute. "We have information of the greatest urgency!"

"The location of the Mutant Army," Panthro said. "Finally!"

"More than that," Myrlha said, flushed with excitement. "Salvador's people are there as well, and there are powerful enemies gathering!"

"We'll have plenty of time to discuss this in the morning," Lion-O said. "You two are exhausted. Pumyra will examine you and, once you have some hot food and a night's rest..."

"Forgive my impertinence, Excellency," Myrlha said, cutting him off. "But the Wollos and Brute Men are not the only ones. Highness, there are other survivors there enslaved as well."

"More of our countrymen?!" Tygra gasped, eyes wide.

"Yes... *COUGH* I... Ohhh..." Myrlha, unable to keep on her feet any longer, lost consciousness.

"Pumyra, get her in the infirmary!"

"On it!" she exclaimed, taking a shoulder with Bengali hoisting the other. The two charged into the Tower, Pumyra already compiling a list of what she might need.

"First," Salvador said, "My daughter, Rosa, is she here? She was about to give birth when..."

"She's not here," Cheetara replied, kneeling down in front of him. "She's with the Warrior Maidens. A bolkin found her wandering the forest, and he brought her there."

"She is safe?!"

"Rosa is healthy and whole," Cheetara said with a smile. "As is your grandson." Salvador began to quiver at the news, then fiercely embraced Cheetara as tears of joy ran down into his snowy beard.

"Thank God," he breathed as she held him. "Thank God!"

"Lion-O," Panthro said as he walked over to the Lord of the ThunderCats. "Sho's back, and something's wrong with him."

"What is it?"

"He was saying something about accepting punishment. For the life of me... Wait, I think I know what this is all about."

"Don't keep me in suspense, then."

"When he showed up here, he didn't see you, the kittens, or Lynx-O," Panthro explained. "He probably thinks Guyver killed you yesterday."

"Whoa..." Kit, who had been nearby said. "I'll bet that's been rough on him!"

"I'd better set this straight. Where is he?"

"He's on the roof. I'd been wondering when he'd use the local brooding spot."

"I'll take care of it, then."

"I'll come with you."

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Sho did not even notice the stars as they gleamed in the celestial heights, lost as he was in despair.

Lion-O.

Lynx-O.

WilyKit.

WilyKat.

All dead.

Dead? Wait a second, here...

Sho searched the memory of what he'd seen on arriving at the Tower compared with what he knew had happened before that battle. Something did not add up, but what? Sho searched his memory, addled as it was, in search of the truth,

Okay. I know something's not right about this...

Reconstruct the scene, he commanded himself. WilyKit had been with the others. So had Lynx-O and Lion-O. He knew there had been a forcefield between them and him. Even so...

Another detail made itself known. He had seen Pumyra on the ground when he arrived, yet she had been bound and gagged beside WilyKat in the desert. Why would it kill him and leave her untouched? The more he thought about it all, the less sense it all made.

"I get it," he said, leaning back against the Cat's Eye. "I just spent today making an ass of myself."

"Only the past ten minutes," the familiar voice of Lion-O said from his left. Sho looked over at him with a great wash of relief. "You actually thought Guyver had killed me?"

"I didn't know who it killed," Sho replied as Panthro came into view behind Lion-O. "I just... I couldn't face the probability when I woke up. I know it was cowardly..."

"It would've been if you'd been right," Panthro said. "We had it on pretty good authority not to go near the Guyver in the state it was in."

"Even so, I can't stay here."

"What makes you say that?"

"Um, hello? The fact that, without me, this thing kills whatever catches its eye? What if this happens again?"

"We'll just have to make sure that doesn't happen," Panthro replied. "You're strong enough to do that."

"If I was..."

"Don't even start, Sho," Panthro said sharply. "I know you're not this weak. Remember when Lisker trampled you?"

"Yeah..."

"You could've sulked over it, or hid yourself away like a coward. What did you do instead?"

"I came to you."

"That's right. You had some kind of fire in your eyes when you asked me to train you. Not many would've had the stones to ask me to do that."

"On Thundera," Lion-O explained, "he was called 'Panthro the Deadly' for a pretty good reason."

"And Lion-O knows that reason better than most," Panthro continued. "We both know what the real reason for you coming to me was. I want you to say it. Right now."

"It was Cheetara," Sho replied, knowing that he was being beaten with reason. Just wait until I tell you a little more about me, he thought. "What Lisker wanted to do to her."

"You swore to me you'd make sure that never happened. Now, you want to abandon her to..."

"I won't leave her to him!" he shouted, and winced when they tensed up. He was, after all, still in the armor. "I... I just can't bear the thought..."

"What is it?" Lion-O asked. "I'm thinking there's more to this."

"I can only tell this story once," Sho replied at length. "If I do it now, I can't tell it to the others. I think this is something everyone should know."

"If that's what you want," Lion-O said. "Then present it at council tomorrow morning."

"Thank you, Lion-O." With that, Sho released the Guyver and watched as it faded into whatever dimension it called home while waiting for his summon. "I'm sorry if I worried you."

"Just get some sleep, kid," Panthro said gently. "We can hash the rest out in the morning."

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Lion-O entered the infirmary and glanced at the two slumbering shapes in the dimmed lighting. One, the Thunderian Myrlha, had sundry tubes stuck into her arms with an oxygen mask over her face.

"What in the..."

"I had no choice," Pumyra said from her desk. Lion-O looked at her as she rose from the chair with a data pad in her hand. "She's a sick girl, Lion-O, but I can get her better. Do me a favor and remind me to thank Sho for that."

"Sure... What's going on here? Start from the top, please."

"Salvador," she began, "as far as Wollos go, is in great shape for the most part. Myrlha, however, is a different story."

"Tell me." he said simply.

"Someone's put her through the wringer," Pumyra spat. "She's at least ten pounds underweight for a woman of her age and lineage. Also, her blood chemistry's completely out of balance."

"I take it this gets worse," he said, reigning in his anger.

"Much worse," Pumyra returned with a shake of her head. "She's undernourished, and there's evidence of broken ribs that haven't properly healed. But, that's not the worst part." With that, Pumyra handed Lion-O a small medical data padd which displayed Myrlha's alarming vitals. "By the time they reached Darkside, she was running on pure adrenaline and about a gallon of willpower. My tests show that she's developing pneumonia in her right lung. As weak as her immune system is, it would have killed her inside three days, maximum."

"Damn..."

"In short," Pumyra said around a weary sigh, "giant snake nonwithstanding, if Sho hadn't found them when he did, Myrlha would never have made it out of Darkside."

"I take it she won't be able to deliver her information tomorrow."

"In about a week, maybe," Pumyra replied. "Lion-O, we're not dealing with a healthy Thunderian here. The pneumonia itself wouldn't be a problem if not for the underlying conditions she's already suffering from. All this with pneumonia on top, it's a wonder she's lived this long." Pumyra took a deep breath. "I've started her on an aggressive treatment regimen, but with everything else that she's suffering from, recovery will take some time."

"Time our countrymen might not have."

"She might be able to tell you tomorrow," Pumyra said. "I'd even lay good odds on it. But, leaving her bed? She'll need at least a week, likely more."

"I see," Lion-O replied. "Pumyra, I don't think we can wait very long..."

"I know, but there's no choice," she replied. "If we push her too hard too soon, we'll end up killing her. I've never lost a patient before, and I won't allow her to be the

first!"

"She won't be," Lion-O replied with a placating gesture. "I'll question her personally, with you present. You'll have control, if you think we need to stop, then I'll stop. But, remember..."

"I know," Pumyra replied, "nearly two hundred of our countrymen are waiting for us. We have to move quickly."

"Will Myrlha need you to keep watch all night?"

"Tygra will take over at three AM," she replied. "I only have two hours to go."

"Very well. I'll want a full report in the morning."

"Count on it."

Lion-O, exhausted, collapsed on the bed before he noticed Cheetara's slumbering form on the other half.

"Can't sleep either?" Her voice startled him yet again that night.

"I just got Pumyra's report," he said at length as his eyes adjusted to the gloom through which he saw her. Cheetara was nude, propped up on one arm and gazing at him. The blankets of the bed were pooled about her waist, barely hiding her sex from him. Lion-O's nostrils flared at the scent of her, so ready and waiting.

"She'll be okay?"

"Pumyra says she'll be fine in time." Lion-O breathed deep her musk, the scent driving him wild. "Oh, you smell wonderful..."

"Thank you," she said as they embraced. "Today's been a strange one. I could almost think Sho's picked up a habit for saving Thunderian lives." She felt his claws against her back and shivered at the sensation.

"If so," Lion-O said before nuzzling her throat, "I won't try to break him of it."

"Perish the thought." Cheetara fully engaged his lips for a moment before backing off. "You know that, whatever comes, I love you."

"Of course I do."

"What do you feel for me, then?"

"Cheetara, where do I begin?" Lion-O asked. "You've always been there for me. A mentor. A friend. And, best of all, a lover. I can't put what I feel about you into words. I... I love you just doesn't do it, but it's all I have..." Cheetara's kiss silenced him as her hands removed his tunic.

"It'll do nicely," she said as she embraced him. "It's a little late for anything exciting, though."

She embraced him in the darkness, listening to the steady rhythm of his heart as it lulled her into slumber. There, in the crutch of his powerful arms, all the pain in her history seemed distant. Life as a ThunderCat was always a risk, with each day bringing new dangers and more inventive ways of losing one's life. Moments of peace such as this became all the more precious for it. Just before sleep claimed her, Cheetara briefly wondered if Cougrix would be happy for her, there in the arms of another man.

There was no if about it. She knew he would be.

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In the next episode:

Sho tells the ThunderCats about the horror of the Guyver when operating without him. Salvador relates his journey with Myrlha across the wild country of Third Earth and the condition of their enslaved countrymen. Myrlha's recovery proceeds, and plans begin to formulate for a rescue assault. Meanwhile, Oswald Lisker begins to implement a plan to attain his own goals, of which the Wollo Maria is integral. For her part, Maria must deal with the very real feelings for Lisker growing inside.

The final battle between the forces of good and evil races closer, with the fate of everything hanging in the balance, in the next episode of One Last War to Fight.