ThunderCats

Bio-Booster Armor Guyver

One Last War to Fight

Episode Twenty-Three: The Paths We Take

By Knight Writer

What the hell was that dream about? Sho asked himself as the first rays of the sun peeked through the clear pane of the window of the barraks in which Cheetara, Tygra, and he had slept in. Details slipped through his fingers like morning fog as he tried to assemble some cohesive image of it. All he could recall was a warm feeling of satisfaction and contentment. Whatever, he thought as he roused himself from beneath the sheet. Having slept on his stomach, Sho rose up on all fours and stretched himself outward with a releived groan. Sho swung his legs out and onto the floor and found himself facing a wide-awake Cheetara and Tygra looking at him with quizical amusement.

"What?"

"Feeling a little feline this morning?" Cheetara asked with a wink.

"Huh? Wha... Oh!" Sho blinked hard when he realized what she was talking about. "Well, Analee did say you guys were rubbing off on me."

"And in unexpected ways," Tygra chuckled. "I guess the Code of Thundera isn't enough for you, Sho. I'll wait until you start developing stripes before I become worried."

"Now, Tygra," Cheetara admonished. "Personally, I think he'd look good in spots."

"I could do the spots," Sho replied, getting into the joke, "but I don't think I could pull off the leotard." Hearty laughter echoed in the low-ceilinged barraks for several moments after the jibe.

"Now, if I catch you trying it on," Cheetara added, "then *I'll* be worried!"

"Jeez, *I'd* be worried at that point!" Sho hooted, and all three fell into a bout of hilarity again. The trio were still chuckling once they stepped out into the new day to the sight of gomplins in the corral being outfitted with heavy bombs.

"Friends!" Turmagar shouted, running over in a clear hurry.

"What's this?" Tygra asked.

"There is battle coming," the Tuska said gravely. "And if my warriors are to fight it by the ThunderCats' side, then we will come correct!"

"Thank you," Cheetara said warmly. "Will you be returning with us?"

"No. I must finish organizing the transfer of troops. We will arrive at the Tower by sundown tomorrow."

"Until then, friend," Tygra said before the three walked to the waiting ThunderTank. The two Thunderians occupied the front with Sho taking a place at the rear partition facing forward just behind them. The mighty engine roared into life with a sequence of switches and handles that left Sho utterly baffled. "Since I didn't steal it, Sho, I won't drive it like I did."

"Okay, okay, I get it. The joke was lame."

"Very."

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He finished dressing, frowning at the wrinkles that had taken residence in the fabrics of his clothes from when he had casually discarded them on the floor. Lisker straightened his tie and ran a hand across the stubble now adorning his face with a grimace. There was nothing even approaching a clean, or safe, shaving implement to be found in his quarters and he had not had a beard since he'd first sprouted one during his teenage years.

Well, damn, he thought, look at the woman you made love with last night. He did so and found himself smiling gently. The sheet came up to the small of her back, his eyes tracing the curve of her spine which moved easily up and down with each relaxed breath she took. On looking, really looking, at her, Lisker saw much in her body and face that was in fact more human than he had first thought. He didn't want to wake her, she needed her sleep after what they'd done the night before, but he knew he had to.

"Maria," he said, gently shaking her shoulder. She snored softly, then blinked her eyes a few times in the growing light. They focused on him and a smile played across her lips.

"Morning already?" she asked, her voice thick with sleep.

"Morning already," he repeated as an answer. "How're you feeling?"

"I am well," she replied around a yawn. "Last night was not a mistake, Lisker. Never think that."

Damn! he thought, stunned. He had, on some level, been thinking that. It was a risk to his plan to get too closely involved with her, and he had been entirely honest when he'd said he didn't want to force such a choice on her. Looking down at her, he could see that her mind was firmly made up.

This is a complication! the pragmatic side of him screamed. Break it off while you still can!

"I won't." His voice betrayed nothing of his inner emotions. From next to the bed, he grabbed Maria's jacket and handed it to her. "You really shouldn't be too far away from this from now on."

"I know." Maria accepted the garment from him and rolled onto her back to cover herself with it. "Will your preparations be finished today?"

"No," Lisker replied. "I have to meet with Grune and Chilla to help plan our defense against the ThunderCats." Maria's face fell slightly at that. "All part of the plan, Maria."

"Still, it makes me uneasy to hear you say that."

"Just remember that everyone will be free at the end of it." He didn't add the inevitable "if". Such went without saying. "I'll be back." Without a further word, Lisker made his exit from the bedchamber and Maria heard the main entrance open then shut and lock behind him.

She lay there, Lisker's jacket all that was between her and the world, and breathed in his scent as deeply as she could. He was having second thoughts. She could see it in his motions and hear it in his words. She could not blame him, truth be told. Not many would accept a Wollo and a human as a couple. Maria had heard of some Wollos who had eloped with human lovers, and often never returned. If her family knew that, not only did she feel this way but that she had given him her maidenhood, it was possible they would cast her out.

No, she thought as she curled up into the strange fabric, they would certainly cast her out of their house. A Wollo of her unusual stature, and not many ever stood above four and a quarter feet and she was five even, would have had difficulty finding a husband among her own kind. Her father had even been discussing an arrainged marriage for her just before Dyme's attack had destroyed their village and enslaved them here.

If that hadn't happened, she thought, I would never have met Lisker. Fate, it seems, can be so capricious. She hadn't told him any of this, of course. She knew he felt bad enough about making her choose without hearing what her own family would do. For the first time, Maria realized just how much love could hurt.

I must be strong, Maria thought as she donned the coat whose threads were coated in his scent. I made my choice, even if Lisker does not fully realize it. She breathed his essence in as she dressed herself in the only garment she owned and recalled their previous night of passion. His motions had been so gentle they were nearly timid from fear of causing her harm and at first her moans and cries had been encouragement. Before long, though, those cries had been genuine indeed and filled her ears as he...

Maria smiled to herself at the recollection as she curled up in the jacket. Lisker's gift to her pressed into her side and she revelled in its presence as well. With the Wollos, she faced the prospect of a loveless marriage without her right to choose. Without them, she had freedom to

decide for herself what she wanted. She had him. She would miss her friends, her parents, but she would have the one she truly loved. And, it wasn't as if he couldn't protect her. Her people would be free again once Lisker's plan came off, and she was to be the instrument of that freedom. Given that, Maria felt better about her decision.

"Papa... Mama... I love him," Maria said as she rose from their bed for another day of anxious waiting. For the ThunderCats. For freedom. For Lisker. "Even if you never forgive me, I love him." She knew she would not get the chance to say such to them in person, and not having them present made the words easier.

She needed him, Maria realized, perhaps as much as he needed her.

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"Lisker," Chilla nearly purred once Grune left what would become the main control room of Fortress Plun-Darr, "I want a word with you. In private."

"It's private enough here," the human said, crossing his arms and staring directly into her eyes with a look of cold determination. "What do you want?" Chilla reigned in her temper at his impertinence. She needed this to come off smoothly, and Lisker wasn't exactly a normal human. Not by a fucking long shot.

"Merely to offer you something," she said, sauntering closer to his rigid form. "Something, I think, even better than that Wollo can."

"She is none of your concern," he replied, eyes narrowing in unmistakeable anger. "I already have someone to keep my chambers in order."

"Sure you do," she chuckled. "Don't try the coy approach with me, I know why you have her there."

"Think what you want, Chilla," Lisker said, his voice growing several degrees colder. She found herself becoming grudgingly impressed. "On that note, I could say I know how you managed to gain Grune's confidence." Chilla's cheek gave an involuntary twitch at his verbal barb. She decided to try another tactic.

"That monkey who gave Grune his report seemed alarmed," she began, "saying that at least forty weapons were missing from the ammo dumps on the ships."

"Forty. Hell, Chilla, the only reason he got to twenty is because those damn apes don't wear shoes."

"All right, I'll give that one to you," she replied around a genuine chuckle.

"I don't know about you, but I wouldn't trust anything those incompetents say. After all, the Mutants have a human, a Lunattak, and a Thunderian lording it over them. They've *got* to be hating that."

"What're you getting at?"

"I wouldn't be surprised if they didn't stash those weapons themselves. Just in case, like."

"Not like that'll matter," she replied with a silken smile. "Not to you, anyway."

"That's right," Lisker said. "It doesn't matter to me. Those cats will bring Guyver One. *That's* what matters to me." Lisker abruptly spun on his heel and walked out without another word.

You little PRICK! Chilla thought with a huff of breath which froze the floor in front of her. Spurn ME will you?! A Wollo bitch is good enough, but *I'M* not?! She brought her anger under control with some difficulty, breath coming in deep gasps and blood running hotter than she liked.

Obviously, it took more than simple seduction to sway Lisker. On thinking about it for a moment, Chilla couldn't help but be surprised. Regardless of species, and the little fact that survival wasn't a guarantee, men often proved unable to resist her body. Even the human men she'd taken by force had gotten into it once the... festivities... had started. This one was quite different. Chilla briefly toyed with the idea of freezing his precious Wollo to her very cell structure for turning her away and quickly discarded it. The last thing she needed was to end up on his shit list alongside the other Guyver. And that one had proven dangerous enough...

Tread carefully, Ice Queen, she thought, unconsciously using the name Alluro would use after sex. That one's a ticking time bomb, and you don't want him to go off on you.

FUCK!!! Lisker raged. It took all he had to maintain a calm outward appearance as he proceeded through what had been built of Fortress Plun-Darr. The Mutants which had been in charge of driving the slaves practically leapt out of his way, yet he barely noticed. He hadn't counted on them having any sort of inclination to keep detailed records. He'd known they'd notice some weapons missing, but so fucking soon?! DAMN IT!

Okay, time to plateau. You have a way around this. Lisker resisted the urge to touch the keycard in his rear pocket which had granted him access to what he needed. It would put even more on Maria, which Lisker did not want in the slightest, but now there was no getting around it.

Let's not forget Chilla, he thought with a barely repressed grimace. In turning her advance aside, he had just made an enemy he couldn't really afford. The power which had attracted her was now his only card against her. Whatever move she made against him would be well planned and executed. Lisker knew he'd have to watch carefully for her. How long would this mad three-way stalemate last? Hopefully, long enough for whatever grudges and agendas they all had to no longer matter.

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After the tedium of having spent so much time riding in the ThunderTank, Sho didn't mind one bit the burning in his arms as he swung the pick into the wall. He worked as hard as his muscles allowed, then demanded more as he labored to harvest the Thundrillium the ThunderCats needed to mount the rescue operation that was being planned back at Cat's Lair. Lion-O, being Lord of the ThunderCats et al, needed to be in on every step, and had ridden back to the Tower with Cheetara just before Sho had descended into the new shaft.

"Now, this does seem familiar," Sho said as he gouged another chunk of rock away form the ore.

"Here's hoping this time it ends better," Bengali replied, running his hand over a stubborn layer of rock. "Might want to stand back a bit."

"Okay." Sho did so as Bengali pulled a hefty-looking sledge off of his back. The larger hammer was emblazoned with the ThunderCat symbol in the center of its handle, twin tiger heads atop the pommel bearing the hammer's ends from their roaring mouths. Bengali hefted the sledge with a confident hand before rearing back and bringing it down on the stone slab. The gunshot crack of exploding rock echoed loudly in the confines of the shaft as splinters shot clear from the crumbling mass.

"Sometimes, Sho," he said, turning about with a cocky grin on his face, "you just need to have a bigger hammer."

"Size does matter, I guess," he replied with a shake of his head. "Looks like you know how to use it, too. You've gotta be proud." The two of them snickered at the joke before resuming their work, chiselling and digging in the depths of Third Earth for the fuel they needed.

"I'm a blacksmith," Bengali said as he swung his pick once more. "You're bound to encounter a hammer or two in my line of work."

"Don't blacksmiths have a forge or something?"

"I do. It's in the lower levels of the Tower." A chunk of Thundrillium landed at Bengali's feet and the two of them stooped to retrieve it. "Mostly, I repair and forge armor for our vehicles. Even fixed the Sword of Omens once," he added with a hint of pride.

"Guess you've had a load of work lately," Sho said once the ore was added to the pile in the cart.

"Nothing I can't handle." The two of them set to work again and after a moment's labor, Sho realized that the chunk of ore he was working around was quite a bit larger than he had thought. "Maybe you could take it up," Bengali suggested as Sho swung again.

"Huh? Being a blacksmith?"

"Sure," the ThunderCat replied. "It's an honest trade, and you'll never be out of work. Besides, it'll toughen you up in no time."

"I guess," Sho said at length. "Can't hurt to work with my hands some more. But, who's gonna teach me?"

"In case you weren't paying attention, I *am* a blacksmith."

"Oh. Yeah. Right. Brain fart."

"Brain WHAT?!"

"Sorry!" Sho yelped, embarrassed. "It means I wasn't thinking. Man, I've gotta be more careful with..."

"PSSHGGGKK... HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!!!!!"

"Bengali?"

"Oh... Oh, wow, kid, I've gotta use that one sometime!"

"Feel free," Sho said with a smile before chipping away at the stone once more. More and more of the Thundrillium was exposed as he worked away at the rock to reveal a sample of ore that seemed to be loosening at last.

"What's going on down here?" Panthro asked as he drew near. Sho, who at this point had been trying to work it free with his hands, looked up as the Panther ambled over to him. "Say, that's a pretty nice haul you've got there!"

"If I can just get the damn thing out, I'll be accomplishing something," Sho growled as he wiggled the Thundrillium back and forth.

"Why don't you let me take over," Panthro said, placing a hand on his shoulder. Sho hesitated for a brief moment before realizing the truth.

"Hope you have better luck..." Sho faltered as Panthro gripped the ore and with a growl pulled the large piece of Thundrillium free. "... than I did..." He stared in amazement as Panthro then walked the ore to the waiting cart, which bounced on its suspension when the Thundrillium was dropped into it.

"You're not the only strong one around here," Panthro said with a grin. "Looks like you're full up. Better get this topside."

"Uh... sure..." Sho engaged the powered wheels on the mine cart before looking back at Bengali. "Once this battle's won, I'll definitely take you up on that offer."

"Offer?" Panthro asked with a curious glance.

"I offered to train Sho as a blacksmith once the Mutant Army's dealt with," the Bengal replied. "I thought it wouldn't hurt for him to have a trade, something to do when he's not mining Thundrillium or blowing up people who want to kill us."

"Are you sure about that?" Panthro asked. "I'm no expert on the subject, but smithing isn't exactly an easy job."

"Neither's this," Bengali said, "but Sho took right to it. He's not a complainer, that's for sure." The Bengal returned to his work liberating another sample of ore.

"How much are you planning to teach him?" Panthro asked as he joined the effort. While Sho's help was appreciated, in his human form he simply lacked the strength of a Thunderian, and the harvest could proceed a bit faster without him swinging a pickaxe. However, it was all a part of Panthro's training regimen, and every pair of hands were welcome.

"What do you mean?"

"You're able to repair the Sword," Panthro explained. "I like the kid and all, but I don't want anything sensitive regarding our secrets getting out of ThunderCat hands... What's so funny?"

"No need to worry, Panthro," Bengali said once he was done chortling. "It doesn't matter how much I teach him. Sho'll never have a full knowledge of how the Sword of Omens works."

"Care to elaborate on that?"

"I don't really know how it works, either," Bengali explained, freeing another piece of ore and lobbing the fist-sized bit into another waiting cart with a deft no-look toss. "The only ones with any clue to that are Lion-O and Jaga. The Sword's power rests in the Eye of Thundera."

"You talk like I didn't know that already," Panthro replied, becoming slightly annoyed.

"The blade is only a conduit for the Eye's power. The alloys it's made from are unique, but still metal. The Eye is what really forms and shapes it, the smith just does the physical labor. It can even incorporate foreign metals, no matter how inferior, into the blade and re-form them into what it needs."

"I see." Panthro'd had no clue about any of that, and made no effort to hide his surprise.

"Hey, you said it yourself. You're no expert on the subject."

"Okay, okay," he replied with a small smile. "Don't let your head get *too* big over this."

"I won't." The two of them returned to work, the purpose of them being there ever present in their minds.

Sho emerged into the daylight and briefly wondered why there were so damn many desert regions now. The area of the continent they were currently in had tended to be a tad dry, he knew, but the nastier deserts were... where?... Yeah, he thought, farther southwest. Just what the hell happened while he'd been asleep, anyway?

He followed the tracks to the waiting hopper, an enormous cylinder atop a sturdy trailer hooked to the rear of the ThunderTank, and the crane setup which Lynx-O stood ready beside. Sho did not question the wisdom of having the blind ThunderCat operating the mechanism. He'd seen Lynx-O in action and knew that his blindness was far from the handicap it would have been for a human during Second Earth.

"Just there, Sho, thank you."

"No problem." Sho came to a halt just when the rumble of the crane started and the boom moved into position. He stood aside as the grapple swung down and siezed the cart and Lynx-O maneuvered it over the open port of the hopper. The bottom of the cart swung open at the front to allow the Thundrillium to freefall into the hopper with a hollow echo. "Sounds like we'll be here for awhile."

"Indeed. I have just received word that WilyKat and WilyKit are on their way to render assistance."

"Sounds good. I'll head back down, then."

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Weary and frustrated, Lisker entered his quarters with teeth hurting from constant grinding. He did not know why he had returned here with the sun only just beginning to set. Further preparations were too dangerous, now, and he had all in all nothing else to do. The other slaves were penned and subdued, there was no need to watch over them. He sat on the hard bench - whomever had been here before obviously hadn't been big on furnishings - and moved to stretch out when sudden movement registered in the corner of his eye and only his experienced mind kept him from lashing out at what he knew to be Maria. She sat quickly, guiding his head into her soft lap and Lisker did not resist. Already, he could feel the tension of the day begin to bleed from him.

"You are back early," she said, stroking his flaxen hair lovingly. "I am not complaining." She looked down at him, an expression of concern creasing her features. "You are angry."

"No. Well, yeah. Not with you, don't worry." He flinched a little inside at the relief he saw in her eyes.

"What is wrong, then?" Lisker stretched his legs out and caught himself pressing his head into her lap. God, how long had it been since a woman had offered him any kind of succor like this? Not since his mother, he knew, and the number of years between his boyhood and now still made him blanch.

"Change of plans," he said, reaching up to carress Maria's cheek. "I didn't want to do anything like this, but I've got no choice." Lisker reached behind him into his back pocket and pulled free the keycard. "I hate to put even more on you, Maria, but..."

"Tell me what has happened."

"The Mutants think something's up," he replied, the rythm of her hand atop his head soothing his abraded nerves like the most expensive top shelf booze on Second Earth never had. "I can't make any more preparations now."

"Is what you've done enough?" Lisker didn't need to even pretend to consider his answer.

"No." Maria's face fell at that one word.

"Then, there is no chance?"

"There's a chance," he said, taking her free hand and placing the card in it. "Keep that with what I gave you. The Thunderians have to know where the armory on this ship is. It's nowhere near what I wanted to set up, but I have to cut my losses and hope for the best."

"I am to give this to them, then. I understand."

"I'm sorry to put so much on you..." Lisker stiffened slightly when she bent down to kiss him softly.

"I am strong enough for this," she said, "because of you." Her hands stroked his cheeks lovingly, and Lisker found himself torn between his emotions and his reason. "I never would have found this courage if you had not been here."

"You should never have been here at all," he said regretfully.

"I am, as are you. That is said and done."

"I never would have thought I'd find someone like you, Maria," Lisker said, ignoring the conflict in his own mind. Maneuvering or honesty? Affection or seduction? Lisker did not know for sure and honestly did not care at that point. What they felt was what they felt, pure and simple. He was not surprised when her hand ran down his firm chest.

He loves me, Maria thought, seeing the emotion among the turmoil in his blue eyes. He is torn, but he loves me. His statement about the plan bothered her, but not overly much. She knew inside that she could carry out her role in the liberation of all those enslaved in this hell.

Even here, though, she had found a piece of Heaven in Lisker's arms. She kissed him once more, revelling in the raging feelings the contact of their lips sparked in her heart and mind. They broke after several moments, both breathing more heavily than before.

"Just as I can do what you wish of me," Maria began, her voice becoming husky, "you can begin again once this is over."

"Maria..."

"I want to be there with you, Lisker, every step of the way. You do not need to be alone on Third Earth."

"I know you do."

"You do not wish me to?"

"I... I do, but..."

"Our love may be forbidden," she said, "but it is no less real for that. I. Love. You. That is all I need."

"You need more than that. What kind of life could I give you?"

"One in which I can choose," Maria replied before she could stop herself. Lisker's gaze became puzzled, curious as he asked what she meant. "My father was trying to arrange a marriage for me before this happened."

"And the guy he was looking at didn't do it for you, huh?"

"That... is one way of putting it." Maria couldn't help but smile at his phrasing. "It was one I did not love, but that did not matter. So long as I had a husband and children, my family would have been happy."

"If they knew about us..." he began, his face darkening.

"Yes. I would be cast out."

"Damn. Maria, I'm..."

"Don't apologize. I am happy with my choice."

"You could always tell them I raped you."

"Don't even think that! Besides, we Wollos are known as horrible liars. My father would see through it. Then what would happen?"

"You really love me that much." It was not a question, she knew. It was an expression of amazement.

"Haven't I said as much?" Maria replied.

"More than said it," Lisker said with a lopsided grin that made her blush furiously beneath her downy coat. "We'll just have to play it by ear."

"Thank you," Maria said, tears of joy welling in her eyes.

"No tears," Lisker said, reaching up to wipe them away. "I never liked to see a woman cry." They remained there, her stroking his hair as though he were a disquieted child for an indeterminable length of time while the light of the sun faded from view and the spartan room became shaded in gray and then in deeper shades of violet on their way to black.

Reason, the one thing which had served him so well on his rise within Kronos, fled before the tide of emotion which Maria's stroking hand atop his head brought forth. Lisker found himself thinking back on his life as Maira's hand carressed his hair lovingly. So much he had seen and done, and yet he felt only emptiness at all he had seen.

His childhood in the suburbs of Chicago had been unremarkable, at least in comparison with his life as a man. From high school, he had enlisted in the Marines with the goal of paying for college, Yale if he could swing it, or maybe Brown. One year in, a PFC Lisker, Oswald Arthur, met a commandant named Richardson. At the time, he'd thought it odd as hell (and more than a little intimidating) that someone of such lofty rank would bother noticing a mere enlisted grunt like him and had found himself whisked into the world of covert ops.

Being a good Marine, Lisker had performed duties that never officially happened in places that, if all went well, were never mentioned on the nightly news. He'd seen death and destruction in all its forms, men he'd shared chow with that morning being turned into chunks of wet meat by nightfall in jungles that crawled with life that would happily feed on living soldiers as well as dead. Warlords, tin Hitlers who murdered the innocent in the name of revolution and incidentally had crossed the wrong REMFs in the American military's Black Ops divisions, fell to his gun before a well-concealed land mine felled him. Lisker, to this day so far away, still shuddered at the sight of his own fucking legs lying twenty feet in either direction of his head.

He had awakened an undetermined stretch later in a sterile while room, certain that the wheelchair was calling him. He could still feel limbs below his waist, shadow pains that his brain used to fool itself into thinking the body was still whole, but looking down to see them still firmly attached had slanted his mind at an angle from which it had never fully recovered.

("Surprised?")

Lisker had jerked to the left at the sight of Commandant Richardson, skin darker than the night and voice as deep as the mighty Grand Canyon, standing amid various equipment whose quiet noises indicated that he was indeed still alive when by all rights he should not be.

("This ain't the VA. Far as the USMC is concerned, you died during routine maneuvers. Condolences later, Sergeant.")

("What the hell is this?!")

Richardson hadn't answered right away, merely telling him that Lisker would be presented the opportunity of a lifetime. After recovery, Oswald Lisker learned about the organization Kronos, whose bio-engineering mastery had not only pulled him from the grave, but made him whole again in the process. He'd risen through the executive training courses quickly, as well as the academic regimen at Harvard University of all places.

Kronos had given him life anew, and a purpose for that life, which he served with dedication. He'd had to maneuver both with and against peers, colleagues, and superiors, and had even been granted the priviledge of delivering a quarterly research analysis before one of the Ruling Twelve, one named Prug'Shutahl. His ultimate goal, before bonding with the Guyver, had been a seat on that council and the power of a Zoalord which he'd heard of but had never seen.

On receiving notice that he'd been selected as a candidate for optimization into one of the Elites, a Hyper Zoanoid, Lisker had found himself reporting to Relics Point and encountering the another of the Twelve, Halmical Valkus. The top scientist and second in command of the entire Kronos cabal, the Zoalord had completely cowed him. During the examination to determine how best to optimize him, Lisker had been asked about his ultimate aim in Kronos. On revealing that he wished to be a Zoalord, Valkus had shot him a look so severe as to make his throat become instantly parched and told him not to let his reach exceed his grasp.

("Don't let your alligator mouth land your canary ass in trouble.")

That had been one of his father's favortie aphorisms, especially when he'd been in his cups, along with the ever-popular one about bars having sawdust on the floor for a reason.

He'd been rotated back to the New York branch to await Valkus' summons only to be sent back to Japan eight weeks later for an inspection of the Tokyo branch and an investigation into gross incompetence in management. Genzo Makashima hadn't been happy to see his gaijin ass, and Lisker had taken amusement from that. Afterward, he'd activated the recovered Guyver Unit and had been secretely releived that he'd been spared optimization. Zoanoids, despite their power, had been as a rule ugly as homemade sin. Then, in his hubris, he sought out the other activated Guyver, and there fortune had sided against him once more.

Lisker opened his eyes to see Maria leaning back against the hard bench, her eyes closed in light slumber. Once again, he was returned to the world of the living, and once again a new life was his. There was no Kronos, no Zoanoids, no politics to deal with.

There was, however, Guyver One, Sho Fukamachi. There was also a cabal of which he was a part, the Mutant Army.

There is, he reflected, something different this time. Lisker traced his hand up the front of Maria's jacket (he could no longer think of it as his) and her eyes fluttered open when his fingers lightly ran across her right breast. She smiled warmly as the hand traced the side of her downy throat to rest atop her cheek.

"Did you sleep well?"

"Didn't mean to. Your legs have got to be numb by now."

"They are fine," she replied with a shake of her head. Lisker cocked an eyebrow at her statement.

"You're right. Wollos really are terrible liars."

"I told you so," Maria said, sticking her tongue out briefly. Lisker rose from the bench and offered his hand to her. Maria accepted and gingerly stood, leaning against him while the blood flow to her legs returned to normal. He had never in his adult life been comforted so, and the realization of that shook him deeply. Never would he have ever thought he'd find such warmth and affection from a woman who wasn't human. Hell, he had given up on finding it from human women a long time ago. "If you like," Maria began, and the anxious lilt in her words brought him up short, "I can... become more acceptable to you."

"Huh?" Lisker returned, confused.

"I can... remove my coat." Lisker paused before answering, realizing she did not mean her jacket.

"Don't."

"It does not get in the way?"

"Not really." Lisker embraced her, remembering the feel of her downy body against his. "That's a part of you, Maria. You shouldn't do something so drastic to yourself just over how you feel."

"Thank you." They stood there in the deepening darkness, holding each other as the night grew deeper. "We really should get to bed soon." Lisker obliged her, lifting Maria into his arms and carrying her into the bedchamber in the same manner as he had the night before. The lights still out, Lisker collapsed onto the hard surface with Maria atop him and his arms around her. He brought her up the length of his torso and kissed her as warmly as he could.

"Thank you," he said, uncaring where those words came from.

"I don't really wish to ask this..."

"Ask me."

"What if the Mutants find out your plan before the ThunderCats get here?"

"I've already thought about that," Lisker replied, reaching up the back of her jacket to stroke her bare back. "If that happens, I'll level this place myself."

"Why haven't you?"

"I guess you could call it politics."

"What?"

"It's like this," Lisker said, his remaining hand stroking her hair. Maria shivered at his touch, a small moan escaping her lips. "If the ThunderCats get here in time, they'll be able to deflect enough of the Mutant's firepower for me to ensure that everyone can escape. If I have to do it alone..."

"Then many could die."

"Exactly. Even with the preparations I've made, I'd still be facing about a couple thousand Mutants alone. I could do it, no problem, but I couldn't protect everyone. I couldn't protect you."

"You're doing all this for my sake?"

"Not entirely. Hell, I can't even explain all of it to myself. I want all of the slaves here to be free. And... Maria, I want you to be with me." It was true, and Lisker could not divine why.

"I want to be with you, too. We can be together once this is over. And we will."

"One hell of a pair we make, eh?"

"But a pair, nonetheless." Lisker relaxed into her embrace as their lips met yet again and the physical repsonses became more intense. "I want you."

"Same here."

"What are we waiting for?"

"I have no idea," he said as Maria doffed her jacket yet again and the heat between them built.

"There is more to this than sex," Maria said as she nibbled his throat and sent heat throughtout his frame.

"I gotta admit, it is good." She nuzzled his throat, then, sending waves of delicious heat through him. "You will be free of this place."

"I know. I know you will do all in your power to make it happen."

"Good." Maria's lips found his again, and he could not hide his physical reaction this time. Clothes and inhibitions were cast to the winds as two star-crossed lovers realized their forbidden passions, uncaring about the traditions of their peoples. From that moment on, Lisker realized, they were forever joined on a level beyond the merely physical. No one, he swore, would tear them apart, and Oswald felt his own Guyver respond to that oath as he took her once more.

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Whoa! Sho thought, staggering at the intense emotions which assailed his mind from a point he knew to be far distant yet felt as though it were next to him. He steadied the tray bearing the covered dish in his hands, breath coming ragged into his lungs and charging his weary muscles. Urgently, he pulled himself out of the maelstrom of pleasure and wrapped the psychic shielding of the Guyver about his vulnerable core. Whatever Lisker was up to, he was sure as hell enjoying it and Sho wanted no part of it. He was in no position to help whomever Guyver Two was tormenting...

It's not that, he realized as he began to walk to the infirmary again with Myrlha's dinner. It was love. Real love?! From LISKER?!! What the hell? Sho commanded himself not to think about it, to put it as far from his mind as possible. He would meet Guyver Two again soon enough, and thinking about him wouldn't make the wait any easier. By the time he reached the infirmary, his mind had returned to a state of somewhat weary calm. The doors slid open and the place he was all too familiar with greeted him.

Myrlha looked up from the book Lady Pumyra had brought for her, a tome of history from Sir Tygra's collection which was dry as the desert yet thankfully diverting as the footfalls drew nearer. The sight of him was surprising, short and lacking any trace of feline heritage. His mop of black hair hung down to his shoulders, twin bangs framing a kind face from which a pair of gentle blue eyes took her in. The blue one-piece fit him well, showing off whipcord muscles which drew her gaze. He looked good in traditional Thunderian garb, that was for sure.

"Hi, Myrlha," he said, setting the tray on the table by her bed and fetching a chair for him to sit in. He was the first human she'd ever seen up close and, despite the obvious differences, his form was rather similar to Thunderian.

"Sho, right?"

"That's me. You're looking a lot better than the last time we met."

"You're the Guyver?"

"Uh-huh. I brought dinner. Obviously, right? Sorry, small talk isn't something I'm good at." Myrlha found herself smiling at his obvious nervousness.

"I thought you'd be..." She gesticulated helplessly as he sat next to her bed and brought the tray over her.

"Taller?"

"I was looking for a euphemism, but yeah."

"I'm a lot bigger in my transformed state," Sho replied. "You must be famished. Eat up. Snarf put his best into this."

"This is great!" she exclaimed, eating with gusto. "What is it?" she asked on finishing.

"Snarf calls it 'Meatfruit Stir-Fry'," Sho replied.

"Meat... Fruit?"

"Don't ask me," Sho replied with a shrug. "It's really good, that's all I know. Meatfruit's something Berbils grow."

"Salvador told me about Berbils," Myrlha said, leaning back against the inclined bed with a satisfied groan. "He told me much about this Third Earth."

"It's... a pretty weird place all in all."

"Even to you?" she asked, puzzled. "Isn't this your world?"

"Not really," Sho said with a shake of his head. "The world I knew is usually called Second Earth." Myrlha noticed the slightly haunted look in his eyes at that statement. "This Third Earth... let's just say it's a hell of a lot different from any place I've ever known."

"I think we can both say that," Myrlha said and both chuckled in wry amusement, yet that haunted look in the human's eyes barely diminished.

"We know where the Mutant Army is, now, thanks to you," Sho said, and those deep blue orbs became determined. "We're getting ready to raid the hell out of them."

"I have..."

"We're gonna need the information you have. Thank you for risking so much."

"For my countrymen," she said, pride lending her voice depth. "Will you be fighting, too?"

"Oh, yes." Sho stiffened, she noticed. "I swore to help the ThunderCats through this mess, and I'm gonna uphold that."

"You do know there's another one like you holding everyone in chains?"

"Yeah. He's *my* problem. Don't worry, Myrlha," Sho said, hesitantly reaching to grasp her hand in his. "Everyone being held there is coming home."

"I'm sure of it, Sho," she replied, clasping his fingers in hers. She wasn't even aware of doing so at first, and marvelled at how right his hand felt in hers. "I never got to..."

"You don't have to," he said, grinning. "I'm just glad you and Salvador made it here."

"We wouldn't have, if not for you."

"Any idea what that huge snake was?"

"Salvador said it was a bone serpent. He didn't know any were still alive in Darkside. To be honest, I was amazed at how you held it off."

"I can be pretty tough when I have to be," Sho said, a hand behind his head and an embarrassed flush on his face. "Pumyra told me you're responding well. To the treatment, I mean."

"Thankfully. She's a great healer."

"Don't I know it," Sho replied. "She's saved my life a time or two."

"Really?"

"If I spend much more time in here, I think she'll start charging me rent."

"And since you don't have any money," Pumyra's voice said as the healer came into view, "you'd be in a world of trouble, Sho."

"GAH!" Sho yelped, leaping clear of his chair and incidentally removing his hand from Myrlha's. For a moment, she found herself missing its presence.

"I see you two are getting on well," she remarked, her eyes shifting to Myrlha's now-empty hand.

"Well... that is... ah... I wanted to check on her, and..."

"It's fine, Sho, really," Pumyra said, smiling at the flabbergasted human.

"I'll just... I'll get out of your way, yeah, um, take care, Myrlha..."

"You, too." Myrlha smiled as, now done stammering, Sho made his uncertain way out of the infirmary. "He's an unusual one," she remarked as Lady Pumyra began the familiar procedure of checking her vital signs.

"He can be," the healer said. "Getting better all the time, Myrlha. I think you'll be able to address the Council as early as tomorrow."

"I can hardly wait," Myrlha said.

"Well, I'm afraid you'll have to, until tomorrow."

"Can you bring me some paper and a pen, maybe?"

"Sure, but why?"

"Before our escape, the architect among us, Selwyn, showed me the plans he drafted for Fortress Plun-Darr. I had to commit them to memory, since Salvador and I had to travel so lightly. I'll need to put it to paper before tomorrow."

"That'll be a huge help," Pumyra replied. "I'll see to it right away."

"Thank you." Minutes later, Myrlha began to apply her memories to paper careful to leave no detail of Selwyn's plans out. With each line drawn, she could imagine one more of her countrymen freed from slavery, one more Mutant laid low, one more back no longer forced to bend to their hideous whips.

The ThunderCats would free them, of that there was absolutely no doubt in Myrlha's mind. Sho, small as he was, would fight for all he was worth beside them. Given what she had seen of his abilities as the Guyver, that would be no small contribution, either. Her thoughts drifted back to him periodically, and Myrlha had to force herself back to the task at hand. She reviewed her work repeatedly, searching for any detail misplaced or omitted. She was not an aritst, but she'd always been blessed with a photographic memory which once again stood her in good stead as Selwyn's plans were replicated so many miles and days from the man himself. Hours later, tired and satisfied with her efforts, Myrlha placed the sketchpad on the table and pushed it aside.

She looked down at her right hand, which Sho had held in assurance. How long had it been since anyone had shown her such a simple kindness? A soft grin spread across Myrlha's lips at the memory of his un-clawed hand in hers with a slight flush coloring her cheeks.

(Everyone being held there is coming home...)

His words replayed themselves as she clenched her hand and held it to her chest. Home. Stars above, that was a word she never thought she'd hear again. A home for her people. A place where they could all be safe.

(I can be pretty tough when I have to be...)

As slumber slowly claimed her, she recalled how Sho halted the bone serpent's ferocious assault with so little effort. Even though he wasn't Thunderian, he was doing his best to live according to the Code. With power like his, Myrlha couldn't help but be grateful for that.

Night faded seamlessly into dream, a place where Thundera still stood as a jewel in the heavens and the members of her troupe lived on. He was there as well, watching her dance from the front row, his human visage strangely not out of place among her kind.

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In the Next Episode

At long last, the details of the Mutant Army's strength are known, and a plan for liberation is made. The secondary purpose of the ThunderStrike is revealed as Panthro's engineering skills are put to the test in adapting the three-sectioned vehicle to the back of the Feliner and Turmagar's forces assemble at the Tower. Tense waiting at the site of the unfinished Fortress Plun-Darr drives Grune to re-evaluate his alliance with Chilla and attempt to strengthen an alliance with Lisker. Guyver Two continues his protection of Maria as the unlikely couple's bond grows

deeper still while the unnoticed arrival of a strange satellite above the atmopshere of Third Earth signals a new player's hand in the game. Who is it, and what is its purpose? Only time will tell, along with the next episode of One Last War to Fight.