ThunderCats

Bio-Booster Armor Guyver

One Last War to Fight

Episode Twenty-Four: Preparations For War

By Knight Writer

Preparations: Fortress Plun-Darr

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To think, Grune mused, that it would end like this. He drew the second flask of Kirgash as Chilla took her traditional seat on the lone window's ledge with all her glory exposed to anyone who wished to see. Despite her voluptuous curves, it was a sight he'd had quite enough of. Particularly in light of her attempted maneouver against him.

"Good for you, too?" he asked idly as he drew the two drinks and carried them over to the naked Lunattak.

"Earth shaking," she replied with a wink before accepting the offered flask. "No one's ever done me that hard."

"So glad you enjoyed it." Especially since it's your last, Grune thought. "Even so, I'm concerned about your conversation with Lisker."

"Just making sure he's truly on our side," she said languidly, draping an arm about his shoulders after he sat close to her. Not much longer now...

"Lisker, I believe, is on his own side. Much as you are. Or, should I say, were?" He smiled as the arm she'd draped about his torso slackened. Grune rose from the sill as the feeling bled from Chilla's nude frame. "Enjoying your drink?" he asked with some amusement as he reached down to scoop Chilla's unresponsive form in his arms. "I truly hope so. After all, gleaning this herbal cocktail from the Warrior Maidens had taken some time. I may use it on Lion-O, now that I think on it."

"Ba.... ... ..." The toxin did its work quickly, robbing Chilla of even speech as the flask of tainted brew fell from her limp hand to clatter on the hard floor. Quickly, Grune caught her before the Lunattak could join her poisoned drink with a beefy arm across her exposed chest.

"Don't be too surprised," he said, deliberately keeping his tone patronizing. "I can spot betrayal very easily. After all, if the Code of Thundera could screw me over why wouldn't you?" Grune began to stroke her platinum hair, rocking her immoble form back and forth as he continued his verbal torture. "I must admit, I have to admire that human for shutting you down so hard. Then again, maybe that Wollo is just an incredible lay. Who's to say with him? Even in my first life on this mudball I never understood humans."

Chilla was helpless to even express the incredible rage at Grune having betrayed her before she could have done the same to him. Her entire form was incapable of moving, of even registering tactile sensation and the tirade of vitriol jammed in her throat so thick she felt as if she should surely choke unless she could so much as move her lips.

"I don't handle being double-crossed very well," Grune went on, cupping her chin and forcing her eyes to meet his. Those slitted orbs into his mad soul were glowing with an eerie luminescence which, even in her drugged state, drove a dagger of terror into her heart. "You weren't here for my first demonstration of that, and more is the pity. Ah, well," at this he shrugged as though he were merely ordering breakfast at an inn rather than building up to ending her life, "I suppose you'll just have to serve as another example. However, unlike that worthless Scavenger I disposed of, you present some interesting possibilities."

Chilla's heart began to race at the implications clear in Grune's words. Clearly, it wasn't enough for him to simply murder her, oh, no. Desperately, her mind continued to race in search of a way out of this predicament. Unlike her mind, her body remained unable to act upon any opportunity which might present itself.

I haven't drank much of that gunk, she thought. If I can somehow keep him talking...

Grune still held her head aloft, and she made every effort to make her gaze helpless and pleading. If she could recover enough to summon her freezing breath, she could escape! Then, command of the Mutant Army would go to her. Chilla cared little for the latter, and the former demanded every possible effort on her part.

Grune couldn't help but enjoy the hell out of this little game. He knew exactly what Chilla was thinking, and found himself greatly amused by playing along, teasing her with hope the way some Wollos would encourage a stubborn donkey by dangling a carrot before it tethered to a stick. The image nearly made him chuckle.

"Jackalman's death was so quick as to be disappointing. Maybe I should give you to the Mutants?" Real fear shone in her eyes at that statement. "I may have to bind you for that, though. I have no idea how long you'll last, perhaps until the toxin wears off, perhaps not. Either way, you'll still be dead. Trust me, when it comes to death by gang-rape you won't find many more enthusiastic than Mutants." He paused, pretending to consider again. He'd already decided her fate, but stringing her along like this was more fun than having sex with her. And, he mused, that was certainly saying something. "I may just keep you among the slaves? Or, hell, I just might keep you for myself. That breath of yours is nothing a good muzzle couldn't fix." With that, Grune gently cradled her about the waist with one arm before turning her to face the window.

NO! Chilla thought, realizing exactly what he had been planning. NOnononononoNOOOO! Silently, she watched in growing horror as Grune unlatched the window and cast the frames open with a cavalier shove before hefting her in his arms as though carrying his bride over the threshold.

"I believe your friends are awaiting you in whatever hell is reserved for you Lunattak people. If it's any consolation," he continued as she stared in abject horror at the open portal, "you were the most fun I've had in centuries." Though she had no tactile sensation, she could still feel in her mind the open air greeting her and gravity pulling her relentlessly to the ground. Tears, the first she'd shed in years, fell from her eyes in evidence of her muted frustration and desperate fear as the ground, raced...

There's that done, Grune thought as his sharp hearing distinctly picked up the sickening crunch of his former lover slamming into the earth so far below the highest constructed window of Fortress Plun-Darr.

No, he thought, lover's not the right word. Acquaintance. Not that it matters anymore. Now, his only concern was Lisker, but that could wait for the moment. He still needed Guyver Two for the coming attack.

"Son of a bitch," Lisker muttered from the shadow cast by the boxy structure of Slave Pen One in the growing light. He had traced Chilla's descent from the moment the light glinted off of Grune's window in the fortress. The sound of her body slamming into the ground at what had to be close to terminal velocity was one that he would not soon forget. He felt no sadness at her demise, however, not a trace of sympathy. She paid her money, she took her chances. The dry soil was already soaking up her blood as if taking sustenance from the blue-black fluid. He found it odd, however, how she seemed not to resist and hadn't at least screamed on her way down.

"Must've doped her," he muttered before snippets of muttered conversation from his left drew his attention.

"Fuck me running," Apelar said to Grothis as they and two Reptillians beheld the sight of Chilla's corpse lying smashed into a pulp on the dirt. "When he says it's over, he doesn't fuck around..."

"You'd almost think that Grune's a Mutant," Grothis replied, scratching his tawny muzzle. "I could see Primor doing that easily."

"And if he isss willing to so casually ssslaughter hiss own lover," one Reptillian whose name was Hriss added, "what'ssss to ssstop him from doing the sssame to uss?"

"Do you always have to hiss when you talk?" Apelar growled in annoyance.

"He's right, you know," the Scavenger Grothis said quickly, cutting off a fight before it could begin. "Maybe Jackalman had a good idea way back then."

"And that isss?" the other Reptillian, Garru, asked.

"All we have to do is take the ships," Grothis replied. "I know Primor had a system in place on the Ravager that would slave the master computers of the Starsweeper, Pillager, and Bludgeon to the computer on the flagship."

"You know the access codes to that?" Apelar asked, eyes wide at the possibility.

"No. Primor kept those like his balls."

"Then, what'sss the point of mentioning thisss?!" Hriss demanded.

"Primor had a concubine, a favortie among the cats," Grothis explained, the plan seeming to tumble into his mind of its own accord. "Real hot number he made sure was taken care of. Good thing for her, Primor liked to play rough."

"You think he gave her the codes?" Apelar asked, dumbfounded. "You take a knock on the head, Grothis?"

"She stayed in his quarters a bunch of times. Who's to say she didn't suss the codes out somehow? Something to hold on to in case a chance to get away came up?"

"I can sssee that," Garru said at length. "What'sss your point?"

"We gotta keep this quiet, real low-key like. Got it?"

"Just get to it, Grothis."

"We get her... Dammit, what was her name? La... Le... Laheela, yeah, that's it. We grab her, make her striped ass talk, then we lit off with the ships and blow this dustbowl. Not like there's anything here worth conquering anyway."

"What about the ThunderCats?" asked Apelar. "Plun-Darr High Command'll want to know why the hell we bailed without making sure they were under our thrusters at takeoff."

"We're a Marauder group," Grothis explained, becoming irritated with all the questions. "Remember that? We're not part of the Plun-Darr military. We're a private enterprise, and a law unto ourselves outside Plun-Darr space. We just delete all records of Third Earth from the computers and nobody'll give a shit about what happened to Primor."

"We ssspread the word, then," Hriss added, "get our forces ready, and bail."

"Grune can't stop us, not with that Dyme monster missing." None of the Mutants had been informed of what purpose Dyme had been summoned away on, and none had any way of knowing that he would never return. "That leaves that fucking punk, Lisker."

"He doesn't care about the ThunderCats," Apelar added, "just that blue Guyver. And the Wollo he's been banging."

"Once we get spaceborne," Garru said, "we can bomb this place and the last stronghold of the ThunderCats from orbit. We can take what's left and get back to more profitable pursuitsss."

"What of the slavesss?" Hriss asked.

"What of them?" Grothis returned. "One thing about slaves, it's easy to get more. Been tired of these cats stinkin' up our ships for awhile, now. Beatin' 'em's getting old, ya know?"

"We can't let Lisker see us make off with her," Apelar said, looking about as if saying the human's name would magically summon him. "He might still be on the Ravager, but..."

"Hriss, you make sure if he's there or not."

"Why ssshould I do it?!"

"Why not? You just tell us if he's in his quarters. If he is, we go ahead with this. We can use the Ravager's holding area on deck ten. Nice and soundproofed."

"Ironic, that," Apelar said with a shake of his head. "We all in on this?"

"Yesss..."

Oh, shit, Lisker thought as he lightly ran toward the Ravager. He had to get there before that lizard did. His plan depended on the desperate countermeasure he had to implement and time had just gotten damn short.

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Hriss trudged along the corridor, his tail sliding along the floor making a sound much like his own plissives when he spoke, a soft hiss. It was a trait among all Reptillians, and Apelar's making light of it still stung. Still and all, Grothis' plan was a good one and Hriss was all for putting as many light-years between his own scaled ass and Third Earth as possible and as soon as possible.

He'd better be in there, the Mutant silently groused as his bare feet carried him along the cold metals which comprised the Ravager's inner construction. If Lisker's location could not be determined, then this little scheme would have to be called off until later. In all honesty, Hriss thought that this should wait until nightfall, but Grune was known to be up and about late into the night and there was no way they could let him tumble onto what they were doing. That Chilla woman wasn't around to keep his nights occupied any longer, after all. Simply bringing him one of the slaves wasn't a guarantee that he would take her, or, that he wouldn't simply kill whomever brought her to him.

Not enough to cast her aside, Hriss thought, but out the damn window! If that Grune wasn't a Thunderian, I could get to like him! The doorway into Lisker's quarters came into view and the noise almost immediately set his nerves at ease.

From behind the door came a female's cries of passion, loud and strident as the Wollo was being taken. He almost opened the lone viewport set into the door when a loud and shrill "LISSSKERRR!" sounded from the other side followed by the inarticulate cries of her reaching what sounded like a heart-stopping climax.

"Guy just can't get enough, can he?!" Hriss muttered under his breath as the Wollo woman continued to cry out and moan. "Sounds like he knows what he's doin' at least." With that, Hriss hurried away from the door as fast as his thick legs would carry him, not wishing to hear those two rutting any longer. When out of earshot, he engaged his communicator.

"It's a go," he said simply before heading toward deck ten and the holding area. Time for some fun of his own...

Apelar, Grothis, and Garru each exchanged a quick look before striding to the front entrance of Slave Pen Two. The sun rose ever higher, yet the temperatures failed to climb as high as when they had first landed. This planet's winter was coming, and none of the three wanted to be around long enough to experience it. The two Scavengers posted at the entrance looked at them disinterestedly, bored to tears with nothing to do and no reason why there were doing it.

"We're here for one," Grothis said. "Open up."

"Sure, whatever," the one on the right said, unlatching the bolt and sliding the door open along its track while the other readied his whip. He followed them in, and Apelar was the first to spot her.

Laheela sat on the hard cot, her dirty frame slumped like all of the other backs. Thunderian, Wollo, Brute Man, no spine straightened at their approach. They knew better by now. Resistance brought whips and blows that they would do better to avoid. She was clad in the outfit Primor had preferred her to wear when not servicing him, a white silk brassiere along with a thin gold belt whose two trails of fabric covered her sex and rear and met at the apex of her legs. It was a single piece of rather expensive fabric that Primor had gone to some lengths to obtain. What there was of her garments had become filthy, torn and ruined from having to labor with the workers and the other concubines since Grune had assumed control thanks to Dyme and Mumm-Ra.

"You." Her head rose, eyes hard and venomous. "Rise." Defiantly, she remained in place though still silent.

"You heard him!" the guard shouted, preparing his whip. The one to her right, a Panther male, placed his hand atop hers and simply shook his head. Laheela heaved a resigned sigh and complied. Shackles were placed on her wrists and the chain linking her leg irons to the floor was loosed. Garru stepped toward her and forced her jaw open to pry a bar between her teeth and

clasped it behind her head. Hobbled and silenced, Apelar grasped the chain between her wrists and led her out into the day.

"That really necessary, Garru?" Grothis asked once they were clear of the pens, indicating Laheela's gag.

"Don't want her trying to get Lisker'sss attention once she getsss to the Ravager," the Reptillian replied.

"He's got something of a reputation among the slaves," Apelar agreed, slinging Laheela over his shoulder to expedite the transfer. "'Specially after the Wollo..."

"Yeah." Grothis had seen Lisker, in his Guyver form, reduce four Simians into piles of steaming meat in seconds for accosting her. "Hriss, is Lisker still in his quarters?" he asked into the comm on his gauntlet.

"From the sssounds I heard," the other Reptillian's voice replied, "he'sss gonna be in there for a while." Grothis needed no explanation, merely barking a laugh at the idea. Whatever that Wollo woman's charms, that human just couldn't seem to get enough. As far as he was concerned, that was just fine. It made this so much easier.

Hriss flinched slightly as the door to the holding area opened and the other three Mutants entered with a bound and gagged Thunderian. He engaged the single light they needed, the harsh glare reflecting off the metal as Apelar ambled over and deposited her on her feet. Less than a second later, he had looped one end of one of the ropes Hriss had secured through the links connecting her wrists and leapt up into the pipeworks above. Apelar used the rope as a pulley, snatching her wrists upward as Grothis secured the chain between her ankles to the grated floor. At the end of it, Laheela was stretched between ceiling and floor, unable to resist and mewling beneath the bar in her mouth. As far as he was concerned, all was well. He ducked into the shadows afforded by the light above her, securing the tool he thought they'd need.

"Laheela," Grothis began, absently stroking the exposed flesh of her abdomen, "we require your help."

"..."

"We need the access codes to slave the other ships to this one." Grothis noted with satisfaction the widening of her eyes. "I take it you know them, then?"

"NMM-MMM!"

"Don't lie to us, Laheela," Apelar added. "Primor isn't here to protect you anymore."

"NMMMM!" Laheela shook her head violently, the chains binding her rattling accordingly.

"You know them, yesss?" Hriss asked, bring his toy to bear. Laheela, he noticed, focused on it instantly with fear shining in her eyes. "Primor has used something similar to this. You know what it can do." Hriss savored her terrified whimper as he engaged the electrode and electricity arced from the sharp tip of the torture device.

"Keep this in mind," Grothis said, grabbing Laheela's jaw and forcing her eyes onto his own. "We're not Primor. We'll hurt you worse than he ever did. This isn't just pleasure for us."

"MMMmmm...."

"You should know what this is," Hriss said, brandishing the hilt bearing the long electrode at its tip. "This will fry your slave ass even at minimal setting. If you don't want its sting, you'll... GHHAKKK!...."

The other Mutants leapt back as the emerald beam severed Hriss' head from his shoudlers and the implement of torture clattered to the floor. The remaining three glanced at each other as the shadow separated itself from the gloom.

"You Mutants are slow learners," Lisker said as he stepped into the light. He kept his anger in check as his armored footfalls echoed in the confines of the holding cell. From each Mutant, bands of deep red indicating rage and fear radiated into the cool air of the holding area. He did not bother to waste any more breath, lunging forward to grasp and crush the throat of the jackal Mutant in less than a second while firing his head beam into the cranium of the monkey which had reached for a whip. The last Mutant, a reptile, stood frozen in place from terror. Lisker charged to it, slamming his fist into its sternum and sending it into the hard metal of the wall with the satisfying crunch of its spine shattering. Even without its ruined spinal cord, the shrapnel of its ribs shredding the heart was enough to end the Mutant's life in short order. With another quad of Mutants dead at his hands, and for the same reason as the last four, Lisker turned to look at their intended victim.

He could see the fear radiating off of her, much like Maria after he'd rescued her from a similar fate. Her cat-like eyes were wide as saucers, nostrils flaring with each terrified inhalation. He strode to her prone position, stopping to retrieve the implement of torture the first one had threatened her with.

"Easy," he said once her muffled voice began to cry out. Lisker casually studied the deivce, a simple electrode at the tip of a flexible rod connected to a handle. Barbaric. "You'll never feel this thing's sting again," he said, bending the supple rod to the breaking point and snapping it in two with a fat blue spark accompanying the cracking sound. He tossed the two halves of the shocking rod aside as he closed the distance between them. He could hear her cardiac rhythm increase as he reached for the chain linking her wrists and pulled them apart as easily as he'd destroyed the rod before gently setting her on the floor to repeat the procedure with her ankles.

"Mmmmm?"

"You can take that off, you know," Lisker said. Her ankles now free, he rose to see her removing the offensive bar from between her teeth. "What's your name?" She only stared at him, fearful and yet resigned. Lisker blew a frustrated sigh at her reaction to him, not to mention the danger his plan still faced. Grune would want to know why he'd killed more Mutants, not as if he really cared, and Lisker couldn't afford for the preparations he'd made to be discovered. "I won't hurt you, and neither will they. No one ever will again, I promise you." Still, she remained untalkative even as Lisker pried the shackles from her wrists and cast them aside. "Listen to me," he said, mind awhirl with chaotic notions regarding his plan and this latest complication. "You're safe now. Not just from these bastards, but from all of them. I have a safe place for you. Follow me." She continued to gaze up at his armored face before closing her eyes and nodding in supplication. Knowing that this was the best he would get, Lisker turned and guided her into the corridor. As they walked, he saw how she kept her head bowed, her shoulders slumped and hands clasped in front of her.

Conditioned reflex, he mused, recalling his psych training while persuing his education in the echelons of Kronos. Ingrained behaviors brought on by external stimuli. She was so used to being a slave, and judging from how submissive she appeared she'd had one *very* strict master, that these patterns would be tough to break.

"Lift your head up," he said gently. "You're not property, and I'm not your master. I'm going to help you." Hesitantly, the Thunderian obliged, facing forward yet still a half step behind him. It might work, he thought as they walked on. After all, it wasn't as if he could just hand her back to the pens, not after seeing what those four had planned for her. Another complication, and he had some smoothing over to do with Grune (which galled him completely) to ensure that his suspicions would not be aroused.

Finally, the door to his quarters came into view with a familiar shadow darkening the wall beyond. Grune came into view before he could deactivate the Guyver, and the Thunderian leader of the Mutant Army flinched back involutarily at the sight.

Conditioned reflex, Lisker thought briefly before hastily crafting his cover story. This performance had to be good, or he'd be forced into an even more difficult position. Killing Grune wasn't a part of his plan. Not yet, anyway.

"Grune," he stated simply, making sure not to stand between him and the unnamed Thunderian woman he'd rescued. "To what do I owe this visit?"

"Why is another slave here?" he asked.

"I had one of the Mutants bring her here. He ended up needing a lesson in handling goods, unfortunately."

"Is that right?" Grune's raised eyebrow prompted Lisker to ready himself for another kill, one he didn't wish to make just yet.

"The jackal got a few of his friends together in the holds below, thought to have a little fun with her first. A mistake on their part, and one they won't repeat."

"In other words," Grune said around a sneer, "you killed them."

"Mutants are slow learners," he replied, keeping his voice offhanded.

"On that we agree," Grune said, nodding. "You're done with the Wollo?"

"No. I simply decided to expand my horizons, let's say." Lisker found that the words tasted vile in his mouth, even though the sonic orbs on his faceplate transmitted what he wanted to say without his lips so much as moving. This conversation wouldn't make winning her over any easier, that was certain, and a part of him wanted to kill Grune anyway for making him say these things.

(You truly are a good man, Lisker.)

Don't really feel like one right now, he thought.

"I can understand that," Grune said around a wry chuckle. "Besides, I really must commend your tastes. This one will be far more satisfying than a Wollo."

"Voice of experience?" Oh, I can't wait to carve you like a fucking turkey!

"You could say that. I trust you'll clean up the mess this time?"

"Why not?" Better I do that than risk one of the Mutants discovering what I've set up in that holding area, he thought. "Word will get around one way or the other."

"Excellent." With that, Grune turned and took his leave, a bit more quickly than usual, Lisker noticed. Whatever he'd wanted to talk about, seeing him as a Guyver had knocked it clear out of his skull.

Confused, and more than a little afraid, Maria crouched at the entrance and strained to make out exactly what they were saying on the other side. Something had gone wrong with the plan, that much had been obvious from Lisker's voice when he'd contacted her via the communication panel set in the wall of the bedchamber. His request had been quite odd, and a little humiliating, yet when the indicator light in the control panel for the door had begun to flash indicating someone was on the other side she had complied. Crying out as though in the throes of passion had caused an embarrassed flush to heat her skin, and Maria hadn't held out much hope that she could be convincing enough for whomever had been on the other side of the door. Imagining the things they had done the night before had helped, yet the relief she'd felt on seeing the indicator light cease its blinking had been profound.

Lisker must have a good reason for having me do that, Maria thought. He wanted someone to think he was making love to me, but why? Before she could take that thought one step further,

the lock disengaged and Lisker appeared beyond the threshold. Maria gasped involuntarily, staring up at him in his golden armor with undisguised fright before seeing the Thunderian woman just behind him.

"L... Lisker...?"

"Maria," he said, his voice distorted by the Guyver, "things have just gotten a little complicated. Please, sit down." He indicated the hard bench to the Thunderian, one whose name Maria had not learned, as he locked the door again. The scantily-clad woman obliged meekly, taking her place without a word of protest or a look anywhere but the floor afterward. He walked over to her and, with a hand on her shoulder, escorted Maria into the bedchamber they shared.

"What is it?" she asked once the door slid closed. Lisker knelt down, bringing his head to her level, and Maria found herself stunned at just how tall he was as a Guyver. The first time she had seen him in this state, she had not been overly inclined to wonder about his size while transformed.

"I overheard a group of Mutants talking earlier, about access codes to control all the ships from this one. They thought she had them."

"And, who is she?"

"I don't know. I didn't catch the name they used, and she's not talking to me. Maria," at this, his armored hands lowered gently on her shoulders, "tell her."

"About the plan?"

"Yes. She'll respond to you more easily than she will me."

"Why?"

"Maria, she's been a slave for a while. From the way she's acting, I'd have to say she was a concubine. That means the one who had her was someone important among the Mutants. She sees me as someone to be obeyed, even moreso after seeing me kill the Mutants who were about to torture her for those codes."

"She has them?"

"I don't know, and it doesn't matter. All we need for this plan to come off is this one ship. I don't give a damn about the others."

"You told me last night that having more people in on it would be a complication," she said. "Why has that changed?"

"They took her into one of the holding areas where I've made preparations," he said, staring at her from behind those white eye pieces. "Even if they hadn't, I just can't take her back to the

slave pens. That one has been put through all kinds of hell, and I'm not even sure she'll cooperate."

"Once she knows..."

"Doesn't matter," Lisker said, cutting her off. "Whomever she served is the one who put all those marks on her. This bastard took pleasure in leaving his marks on her, and she sees me as someone who will do the same thing all over again."

"What makes you think this?" Maria asked, somewhat confused. "I know you mean for all of us to be free."

"And only you. To the others, I'm just a kinder taskmaster than the Mutants and Grune. No matter how much they appreciate fewer lashes, they see me as another slave driver. Nothing more. Maria, even if you can't bring her around, I can't let her rejoin the others. If those four morons figured her a way to gain an advantage, others might as well."

"We are safe in here. With you."

"With me, yes. In here, no. That lock can be popped, any lock can. From now on, you and her are to follow me everywhere. We'll stay here as much as we can, I've sussed out the listening devices and shorted them out, but if I have to go anywhere, you two go with me."

"We shall have to appear subservient," she said, her resolve hardening.

"Yes. I don't want to put you through more..."

"It is all right," she said. Hesitantly, Maria brought her face to the armor and kissed where she thought his mouth lay beneath. "You taught me to have strength. If this is something I must do to ensure freedom for everyone, then I will do it."

"Thank you," he said. "I'll have to leave you two in here for awhile, but don't worry." At that, he tapped one of the medallions at the side of his head. "No matter where I am on this crate, I'll have an eye on you both. If anything untoward happens, I'll know it and come running." Maria nodded once, and Lisker rose to his impressive height and walked her into the main area. Without another word, Lisker took his leave and she found herself alone with the Thunderian.

"Hello," Maria said, easing onto the bench next to the Thunderian. The other woman remained silent, straing down at the floor with her posture resigned. "I am Maria. What's your name?" She received no answer as the orange and black-striped woman continued to stare downward. Maria sidled closer, and saw tears welling in her orange eyes.

"Do not cry," she said, reaching up to wipe away the other's tears. "You are safe here. Please, talk to me." Still no reply. "Very well, then I'll talk. You have nothing to fear from Lisker. From this moment on, consider yourself freed."

"Freed from Mutant whips only to find myself waiting for his." The venom in the Thunderian's voice nearly made Maria flinch.

"Lisker does not have a whip," she said lamely.

"Then his strap. Or his paddle. Or his fist. Either way, I'm in the same boat I was in before. Just because his presence kept us from being whipped doesn't mean..."

"You're wrong!" Maria exclaimed. "Please, just listen to me. You don't know how fortunate you are."

"Oh, so he won't beat me? Just so long as I service him, he'll treat me like treasure? It may be kinder, but it's still the life I had when Primor was alive."

"Stop it!" Maria shouted, becoming angry. "Listen to me, please. You are no longer a slave, not here."

"What?!"

"I am not Lisker's slave, either." The Thunderian studied her closely at that statement.

"You think you're his lover? You think you won't be cast aside? You wear chains just as everyone else, even if they're not physical." Laheela snorted after that. "Face facts, none of us are getting out of here."

"You do not know Lisker like I do."

"I'm sure he treats you well," she replied, "but that'll last only as long as he thinks you're a good toy. Once he gets bored with you, you'll be back in the pens with the others." Maria then did something Wollos simply were not thought capable of.

Her right hand cocked back and swung in a backhanded arc to leave a stinging slap across the other's cheek. For a moment in the following silence, Maria found herself mortified over what she had just done out of anger at the Thunderian's words.

"Oh, I am so sorry!" she sqeaked. "I didn't mean to..."

"If you hadn't, you wouldn't have hit me." Her eyes were dull pools of resignation to her fate, and Maria's heart nearly broke at the sight.

"Do you truly have so little hope?"

"It's been over a month since Myrlha and the other one of your people escaped. Since they haven't been dragged back and executed they either didn't make it, or the ThunderCats have abandoned us."

"Salvador and Myrlha made it to the Tower of Omens," Maria said, becoming confident, "and the ThunderCats have not abandoned us."

"How do you know?"

"Lisker has a... what's the word?... Psychic! A psychic link to the other of his kind with them."

"I've been told about that other human," she said. "So, Lisker just read his mind and now he knows..."

"You'll have to trust me on this," Maria interjected. "Lisker has a plan, one that will ensure freedom for all of us."

"Does he, now? Goodie for him."

"You would rather remain a slave to those savages?" She shot Maria a withering glare, and the Wollo took an ironic sort of hope from it. It was an emotion at least. "You have seen for yourself how easily Lisker can handle the Mutants. I have, too."

"And?"

"Even so, should he challenge them alone then many slaves would die. This plan will ensure that we all escape here alive."

"He may be tough in that armor, but he'd be so outnumbered..."

"Lisker is a Guyver. From what reached my ears concerning the human with the ThunderCats, Lisker could destroy this place. Only his desire to see none of us die is why he has not."

"He's not what I'd call an altruist."

"Surely you've seen how the Mutants began beating all of us less once he stopped that one monkey from whipping me? If Lisker did not want us all free, he would not have bothered."

"As I recall, he said it was so we could work harder. Thanks a fucking bunch, Lisker," she said, waving a hand at the doorway.

"Will you at least listen to the plan?" Maria asked plaintively.

"Sure, why not?" Maria began to explain in detail, the Thunderian's eyes growing steadily wider as she progressed. Several minutes later, she shook her head in disbelief. "So, once the ThunderCats attack..."

"Yes. Will you help?"

"Help? How?" A tiny flicker of hope, so small in fact that Maria almost missed it, appeared in her eyes.

"Do you know how to pilot this ship?"

"No, but some of the others might."

"What about the armory? Do you know where it is?"

"Of course I do. Why?" Maria reached into the hidden pocket she'd sewn into the jacket and produced the keycard Lisker had given her. "No way..."

"Lisker told me it will open the door to the Armory."

"That key'll open any door on this ship," the other woman replied in stunned surprise.

"Trust him. Please." The Thunderian looked away, clearly reluctant. Undaunted, Maria applied a hand to the unblemished side of her face and gently turned her gaze back. "I know trusting someone must be hard for you."

"You have no idea..."

"Especially if it's someone who looks to be in the position that Primor was over you. Lisker will not force himself on you. He will not hit you, or say hurtful things to you. No matter what you may think of him, what I've said is true."

"So, we just stay in here until the plan gets fully underway, huh?"

"If Lisker must leave, then we must go with him. We must appear to be his..."

"Concubines."

"Yes, but that is only to fool Grune and the Mutants. I know Lisker's heart is good, and that he will do what is right."

"You've got a lot of faith in him, I see."

"I do."

"You sound like you even love him."

"Again, I do."

"Oh?" The other woman arched an eyebrow at her. "Does..."

"Yes. He does."

"That's possible? You're both so... different."

"That does not matter." It was left-handed truth, but still true nonetheless. Among Wollokind, it mattered a hell of a lot. But, not to her. "All I can ask is that you trust Lisker."

"You ask much."

"I know. But, I still ask."

"No promises." She let out a mighty yawn, and Maria moved to let her stretch out on the bench.

"Sleep. I will fetch you a pillow."

"M-hmmm."

Laheela accepted the pillow from Maria, not quite feigning the weariness she felt from the adreanaline fading from her blood. She lay there on the austere surface with Maria's words echoing in her head and the Wollo herself having retired to the bedchamber with nothing else to do. If boredom was all she would have to deal with, then Laheela reckoned she could deal with it.

Lisker wants to free us? she thought once the door to the bedchamber slid shut. My ass he does.

To say that life had been unfair of late would be understatement of epic proportions. Were any to ask Laheela of her thoughts, and no one had bothered in some time, she would go so far as to say that life had treated her in a manner most shitty since the fall of Thundera.

Since I was caught by them...

Not by Primor's men, but by the Kalzian slave dealers who had seen in her a high price due to her being not just female and attractive, but also Thunderian. Her kind had become somewhat scarce about the galaxy with the survivors having been scattered, and more than a few of the less scrupulous among the old-credits and nuveau riche in the galaxy would have been only too happy to pay premium cred for one of those that were left.

She had found room and board on a space station which the kind souls who had stumbled across her escape pod had taken her. Laheela had even gained employment as a waitress in the traditional Thoran restaurant run by a somewhat stern owner. The work had been demanding, Thoran quisine having been rather popular in that sector of space, yet the tips had more than made up for the lousy pay and allowed her to save quite a bit toward passage on a cruiser bound for a more pleasant region of the galaxy. She'd learned to dodge overly friendly hands, tentacles, and other appendages depending on species as she labored toward her goal of settling on a friendly world somewhere out there.

That all came to a crashing end her last night on-station. Laheela still remembered the feel of multiple hands seizing her as the icy sensation caused by the sedative which had been delivered

through the skin of her throat via hypo-spray robbed her of consciousness. She had awakened secured to an uncomfortable metal chair, straps across her limbs and torso rendering her incapable of moving along with a gag keeping her mute. The two Kalzians, bird-like beings which were more feral than Avian Mutants, had been sitting at the forward secition of the cramped bridge of whatever ship they had been using and had been haggling with a Simian who would come to dominate her life.

Primor.

Laheela had struggled in vain, her cries of rage and horror muted by the strap covering her mouth, as a price had been settled on. Primor had leered at her, had called her his pet as the chair to which she had been so secured had begun to roll along behind him.

From that moment on, each day had been a course in subservience through pain. Each tiny mistake in her performance, every small sign of resistance, had brought his cruel implements of torture (punishement, he had called them) to her flesh. Primor had taken great pains to ensure that she behaved and performed to his complete liking. He had even forced her to wear the ridiculously skimpy garment he had given her as his sick idea of a gift when not forced to serve him.

Primor had even gone so far as to call her his canvas, and each welt he placed on her orange-and-black striped skin art. With each day of humiliation, another piece of her had died. The news of his own death had done much to restore her badly eroded spirits, and having been placed with the laborers had been a blessing.

Until now...

Was Maria telling the truth? The Code of Thundera had for so long seemed as lost as Thundera itself, but was it possible? Was what she had been told true? Laheela knew so little about Wollos, yet the smaller woman's belief in Lisker had been profound. The plan which had been detailed to her seemed so plausible and, for that, it seemed all the more unlikely. What did Lisker care of their fates? What could possibly make him different from Primor? He was a human and, for all she knew, just as capable of deceit and cruelty as a Mutant.

From a distance, Laheela had seen him bring down a Simian with a few well-placed blows. Lisker was a tough one, at least, yet what he had said made him only a kinder slave driver.

But, just earlier, he had slaughtered the four Mutants who had dragged her into a holding area with the intent of torturing her for the codes she had managed to glean from Primor's personal files after so many months of being his personal toy.

She wouldn't have told me about this if he hadn't made her, she thought. Laheela found herself confused at this recent turn of events. Blessing or curse? Was Lisker genuine?

Uncertain, Laheela drifted into an uneasy sleep haunted by images of her torments and rescue.

==========

The day's confusion had abated somewhat as, human once more, Lisker trudged toward the doorway into his quarters. Grune had avidly avoided him for the entire day, which had suited his purposes just fine. On giving the keycard to Maria, he had been unable to make any further preparations, but he had been able to remain aboard the Ravager. After one errand, anyway.

Just before disposing of the bodies, he had severed the heads of the four and had secured them in a cloth bag which he had carried to the slave pens. The guards had regarded him warily, their animal eyes widening in horror once Lisker had tossed the cloth bundle at their feet and the heads of the four Mutants had rolled into the open air.

"Get a good look!" he had boomed. "If any of you assholes want to play rough, you'd best play rougher than I do!"

While over the top by a good margin, the terror he had seen in the Mutants made the measure worthwhile. If any of the others had the access codes those four had thought she knew, the Mutants wouldn't try for them. Fear could be a very effective tool for controlling the brutish and weak-minded. Besides, it wasn't as if he could be everywhere at once. He hoped that his demonstration would make that little fact moot.

Asleep, is she? he thought on entering his quarters and finding the Thunderian stretched out on the bench. Breath entered and left her with a light sound of snoring, or was it purring? He had little experience with Thunderians. Either way, he could tell she was sound asleep and would not try to leave.

Hell, he thought, where could she go? Back to the slave pens? Not very damn likely. As such, Lisker moved silently toward the door to the bedchamber where he knew Maria to be waiting. The lights were up when he entered, Maria sitting on the bed in all her glory.

"We have known each other," she said upon his entrance. "Do not be embarrassed."

"I'm not. How is she?"

"Hostile and filled with venom," Maria replied with a shake of her head. "I don't think she'll warm to you."

"I didn't think so, either. Still," he said, sitting on the bed and placing a chaste kiss on her lips, "it doesn't matter."

"Truly?" she asked, wrapping her arms around his neck and holding him as tightly as her muscles allowed.

"All the plan really needs is you. I hoped she'd come around, take some of the burden. If she doesn't believe me now, she will once the plan gets started. She'll realize the truth and know what you told her was genuine."

"The ThunderCats should be here soon."

"They'd better be. Or, at least, Sho."

"The other Guyver."

"Yeah." Lisker ran a hand down the curvature of her spine, which sent shivers of pleasure through Maria's frame. "Even if he's the only one to come, and I don't think that's gonna happen, the two of us could easily eradicate the Mutants."

"You will know when they come?"

"I'm pretty sure I'll know when he does. The ThunderCats are gonna be a given."

"Freedom is so close," Maria said before nuzzling his throat for a moment. "And, I can be with you."

"Yes," he replied, not caring anymore where the strange feelings concerning her came from. "I'm not doing this just for us, you know."

"I know. But, it's nice to know that I can call upon a knight in shining armor."

"It doesn't shine, and I'm no knight, but at least I have the armor. One out of three isn't all that great."

"It's enough for me," Maria said, her lips meeting his once more. "You were wrong. She did not believe me."

"It was a long shot at best," he replied, holding her close to him.

"How much more can..."

"Don't ask that."

"Huh?"

"If you ask what else can go wrong, odds are you'll get an answer."

"I see. Don't tempt fate."

"Exactly." Lisker doffed his shirt, and embraced Maria once more. The feel of her down against his skin was heavenly, the Wollo's breasts against his side a source of both pleasure and calm. "If Laheela doesn't want to help, that's fine. I know the plan can come off regardless."

"You're still tense."

"I had to send the Mutants a message. Let's just leave it at that."

"I understand," Maria said, a hand lightly carressing his bare chest. "With these brutes, you have to resort to such measures."

"I'm starting to run out of options," Lisker said, his hand now leisurely engaging her breasts. "If all else fails, I'll just have to take my chances. If they don't get here soon..."

"If you must, then do so," Maria said before staring directly into his eyes. "Even if it means my life, I want you to free everyone."

"Not yours."

"I love you," she said, arms wrapping even tighter around his toned frame, "and I want to be with you. But, if it comes down to my life or the lives of my people, then choose them over me."

"Somehow, I expected you to say that." Lisker kissed her gently, breaking before it could progress. "I said you'd make it out of here, and I meant it." Lisker kissed her again, this time holding nothing back.

"We're not alone in here any longer," Maria said, inclining her head to the door.

"Then we'll just have to be quiet, won't we?"

Laheela silently crept away from the door to Lisker's bedchamber with her mind awash in confusion. His words, his voice, sounded so genuine when he spoke of freeing everyone enslaved here. Was it possible? Was he being honest? A part of her she had thought long since dead wanted to believe desperately, wanted to seize any hope of freedom and not let go until it became reality.

Conflicted by her hopes and her past experiences with said hopes, Laheela lay back on the hard bench to await the coming of the sun.

==========

Lisker awoke suddenly in the new dawn's light, a frown creasing his face as he rose from beneath the sheet. His feet met with the cold metal floor, then carried him to the opposite end of the room while his mind tried to identify the strange tingle which teased his consciousness. What was it?

"Lisker?" Maria's sleep-addled voice asked from the bed they shared. "Is something wrong?"

"I'm not sure," he said at length. The cool air raised goosebumps on his exposed skin as the tingle grew stronger at a steady yet maddeningly slow pace. Lisker focused his mind on that strange sensation, then found himself reaching out through it only to find himself blocked from the source. "It's him," Lisker finally said, a smile playing across his lips.

"Him?" Maria asked. "The other like you? The other Guyver?"

"Yes. He's coming."

"Now?"

"He's blocking me from his thoughts," Lisker said, "but I can feel him. He's pretty far away, but he's headed here."

"The ThunderCats are with him?" The hope in her voice was palpable, an almost physical presence in the room with them.

"I'd put money on it," he replied with a nod. "It won't be long now. A day, two at the most."

"You'll tell Grune?"

"No. Not until it's too late to matter."

"Not much longer, now," she said, and Lisker broke his limited contact when he felt Maria's arms encircle him. "I'm ready."

"Same here," he said, returning the embrace.

Laheela arose at the sound of the door to the bedchamber opening and the sight of Lisker and Maria emerging, the former's face a mask of determination and the latter's beaming hope.

"I never got your name," Lisker said when they reached the bench. Sitting atop the hard surface, she looked up at the human. "I don't want to go around saying 'Hey, you' all the time."

"I don't trust you," Laheela said firmly.

"I guess I can't blame you for that," he replied, closing his eyes and nodding. "I'm sure you've been through a hell of a lot."

"But..." she took a deep, anxious breath. "I will trust you enough to help you."

"Wonderful!" Maria exclaimed, clasping her hands to her chest.

"That's all I can ask of you. That, and..."

"Laheela," she replied, finally giving him her name. "My name is Laheela."

"Laheela. You've been briefed on my plan?"

"Yes. It is certainly bold, I grant you that. The holding area which those four took me..."

"Yes. Under the floorplates of the southeast corner. I hid enough weapons there for ten people to arm themselves."

"Maria has keys to the shackles we'll be wearing?"

"Right here," the Wollo replied, patting her jacket. "Along with the keycard for the armory."

"You won't be wearing chains, Laheela," Lisker said with a shake of his head. "You won't be with the others."

"What?" both women said, confused.

"The ThunderCats will want to fully regroup before they launch an attack. Maria, since your jacket's so large on you, no one will notice the outline of the keys and the card on you. You'll have to join the others."

"And what about me?" Laheela asked, suddenly wary.

"Once they get close enough, I'll sneak you out of here."

"The ThunderCats?" she asked, uncertain.

"Yes. I'll need you to explain the plan to them, and get them to charge the ships. Grune won't be expecting it."

"How do you know?"

"I'm helping him plan for this attack," he said by way of explanation. "I'll do everything I can to divert Mutant scouts from where the ThunderCats are, but I can't promise anything. Please understand."

"All right. So, what will you tell Grune when I'm not with the others?" she asked. "He'll definitely notice a Thunderian missing, especially since you went to such lengths to bring me here."

"I'll... come up with something."

"Not good enough. How are you going to cover me not being here?"

"Don't take this the wrong way," he began, "but I was planning to tell him that I'd killed you."

"What?!"
"Didn't I just say not to take it the wrong way?" Lisker asked, hands spread. "I'll tell him I got tired of your resisting me, and I took care of you myself. It'll cover your absence, and it may even cover anyone seeing me flying you out of here."

"Flying?"

"Remember? Trusting me enough for this?"

"All right. So, what about the other three ships?"

"We don't need those. This one ship will do."

"No. The Mutants who will survive, and some will, would use them to their advantage in the coming battle. If nothing else, they'll flee this world and call for reinforcements from Plun-Darr."

"I see. If you can lock the other ships to this one, then do it. Do you know if any of the Thunderians can fly this thing?"

"I'm not sure."

"As long as all of you stay aboard after gaining control, everything should be all right. Safe bet one of the ThunderCats would know how to run this piece of shit."

"Panthro could," Maria added.

"Panthro? He still lives?"

"Yes. He could pilot this ship, I'm certain of it."

"Either way," Lisker interrupted, "time's getting short. They're on their way right now. Call it a day or two, but they're coming."

"Not much longer, then," Laheela said, eyes shining with unshed tears of hope.

"Laheela," Lisker said, crouching down in front of her, "thank you for trusting me at least this much."

"If you want to thank me," she replied, staring into his eyes, "make sure we're all set free."

"I will."

==========

Preparations: Tower of Omens

==========

Myrlha rose from her bed, feeling admittedly better than she had in weeks. She gathered her sketches of Fortress Plun-Darr and took a breath deeper than any she had taken since reaching Darkside. The simple blue leotard stood out against her tawny skin, and was even brighter than

the light colorations of her hands and forearms, leaving her heels and clawed toes exposed. She had bathed earlier in the morning, before first light, and the sensation of being clean once more was so good as to be heady. Myrlha, for her part, didn't care where she was given a berth to sleep. The floor in the hangar would be infinitely better than where her countrymen were being held.

That'll change, she swore to herself. She sent a silent prayer for the Thunderians and the Wollos still awaiting their freedom to whatever kind-hearted diety was receptive.

"Myrlha?" Sho's voice came from opposite a privacy screen between the bed and the rest of the infirmary. "You ready?"

"I've been ready. Are you going to escort me?"

"Well, since you don't know your way around the Tower, I volunteered to guide you."

"Why are you hiding behind that screen?" she asked, puzzled.

"The last time I just busted in here... Let's just say things got a tad awkward."

"Oh," she replied, understanding. "Well, let's go, then." Myrlha walked past the screen to find Sho waiting and his eyes widening slightly at the sight of her.

"Well... um... This way."

Is he... Is he smitten with me? she thought as she fell into step beside Sho and the two left the infirmary and entered the curving halls of the Tower of Omens. Myrlha found herself smiling a little at that. It was sweet to see how nervous he became around her, and it reminded her of the Lynx whom had the biggest crush on her back in her home town on Thundera, a farming village on the edge of the Kararr-O plains.

She remembered the night before, when he'd taken her hand in his. There had been no nervousness then, no awkward stammering. He had been confident, if a little haunted by something, when he swore to help free all the enslaved ones. His body was of a young man (she assumed, never having met another human), but in that moment he'd shown the heart of a warrior. Her fingers brushed against the back of his hand by accident and she felt him fidget slightly with a faint rose color blossoming on his face.

He's smitten, all right, she thought, and to her surprise she found herself responding to him in kind. She had no idea of Sho's true age, but in her twenty years Myrlha hadn't considered falling in love. Roughly, she shoved all notions of love from her mind. More important matters required attention. Far more important matters.

==========

"AH! Myrlha, welcome," Tygra said as Sho led her into the control chamber of the Tower of Omens. "If you'll hand those papers to Lynx-O, we can begin the briefing." Myrlha did so before taking a seat to Sir Panthro's left. Sho took a seat to her left in suit and, to her surprise, grasped her hand beneath the table. Myrlha did not pull away, merely returning the comforting gesture with a quick look into his sea-blue eyes.

Smitten, all right, she thought as a warm blush crept up his face. How sweet. Their contact broke when, once done scanning the sheets into the complex array of systems situated before him, Lynx-O called the information up on the main viewer.

"You did this from memory?" the eldest ThunderCat asked, intrigued.

"Yes. Selwyn bade me memorize them before Salvador and I made our escape. If the originals had gone missing, the Mutants would have learned something was wrong and likely have re-captured us if not stopping our flight in the first place." In turn, each image appeared before the gathered Thunderians. A finished rendering of Fortress Plun-Darr, a larger incarnation of Castle Plun-Darr which Slythe had enslaved the Brute Men to construct. Grim chambers whose walls were lined with solid doors and dangling chains. Arsenals loaded down with laser rifles, maces, clubs, Nosedivers, the list just went on.

"What can you tell us of troop deployment?"

"Primor may be dead, but his forces are well-trained. Grune will likely keep to Primor's methods to keep things simpler. The two slave pens in the center of the grounds are guarded by a rotating shift of two Mutants each so long as we're in there. Guard patrols circle the perimeter for a hundred meters around, with individual Mutants moving about inside what's built of the fortress. I have no idea how far along construction is, though."

"What of their weapons?" Lion-O asked, and Myrlha found her mouth was slightly dry at being addressed by the Lord of the ThunderCats directly.

"A... As far as handheld weapons, it's pretty standard fare for Mutants," she replied, meaning their various blunt cudgels, poleaxes, and spiked maces. "They have a pretty good store of energy weapons, though not many use them unless facing a larger and better armed force. Primor's troops prefer to kill up close and personal. For vehicles, they've lost a lot of Nosedivers, and their Skycutters have seen some better days."

"They've also got a Warbot," Cheetara added with a low snarl. "Has it been deployed?"

"None of the three Warbots had been taken off the Ravager before I got away."

"Three?" Panthro asked in horror. "We'll have to deal with those things first."

"Primor never put the Warbots out for guard duty," Myrlha explained. "Starting them up takes time, and the power cells they burn through aren't reusable. Or cheap."

"Since when did Mutants care about money?" Bengali asked from Pumyra's right. "Wouldn't the Plun-Darr High Command have some in storage?"

"Sir Bengali," Myrlha began, "Primor and his fleet aren't part of the Plun-Darr military. They're..."

"A Marauder group," Tygra finished for her. "They aren't answerable to Plun-Darr High Command."

"A private enterprise?"

"Exactly, Lion-O. Outside Plun-Darr space, they're more or less a law unto themselves so far as the military is concerned."

"Salvador told us of how you two escaped," Cheetara said to Myrlha, "and of how you two managed to find mounts to speed your journey. Do you recall the route through those tunnels you took?"

"Yes, but the Mutants may have found that fissure by now. If they haven't closed it, then they might be expecting us to use it to sneak in."

"The only way we'll learn the current status of the Mutants is to see it for ourselves," Lion-O declared, "but first we have to get there. Also, we have to determine how to transport all the enslaved people back here."

"I think," WilyKat said, breaking his silence, "the Mutants solved that one for us."

"How?"

"See those four ships?" his sister asked, indicating the area of the compiled diagrams where the starships were berthed.

"I like it," Panthro said with a grin.

"It does have a certain irony to it," Tygra added.

"Laheela," Myrlha said, "has the codes to lock the master computers of the Starsweeper, Pillage, and Bludgeon to the flagship Ravager. With those, we can take all of the ships and weapons."

"That will certainly hamper the Mutants," Bengali replied, smacking a fist into his palm.

"The Mutants will try to use our countrymen and the Wollos as shields," Lion-O snarled. "We have to get them on the run before they get the chance."

"Don't worry about Lisker," Sho said, his voice hard. "The second he shows up, I'll be all over him. I don't know if I can win this time, but I'll keep him off of you for as long as it takes."

"Don't get careless, Sho," Panthro admonished. "You know what happened last time you went up against him."

"That doesn't matter. I'll keep him off of you." Sho's face was filled with determined anger, set in a mask of stone.

"What's left to be determined," Tygra spoke up, "is how we're to get our forces in place. Fortress Plun-Darr is rather far from here."

"Not to worry, now that the Feliner's here," Panthro replied. "When I designed the ThunderStrike, I did so with the intention of using it as a secondary propulsion unit for the Feliner. Gimme a day, and I can rig them together. That'll give us the thrust we need to conserve Thundrillium on the flight there and back, not to mention bringing more firepower to bear on the Mutants."

"Turmagar will be here with more forces tonight," Cheetara pointed out. "We can leave early tomorrow morning if our preparations are made."

"Very well," Lion-O said after a moment of silence. "Pumyra, I'm sure our countrymen will need medical treatment. Gather the supplies you may need. Sho. Myrlha."

"Yes?" the both of them replied.

"Help Pumyra in any way she needs you to."

"No problem, Lion-O."

"Yes, Majesty!"

"WilyKat. WilyKit."

"Ready!"

"Give us the word!
"Help Snarf prepare provisions. I know you don't want to do this, but we need to pull together now more than ever. Snarf can't do all of it alone."

"Leave it to us!" WilyKit piped up, leaping from her seat at the table and coralling her brother.

"Tygra, remain with Lynx-O and determine the best avenue of assault. I'll join Panthro, Cheetara, and Bengali in prepping our vehicles."

"Of course."

Lion-O breathed in deeply and let it out with an anxious sigh. "If we're gonna do it," he began.

"Then let's do it," the other ThunderCats finished.

==========

Pumyra ran through her mental checklist for what felt like the hundredth time as she inventoried the rapidly growing stacks of herbs and medicines. She knew, from the wretched condition in which Myrlha had arrived at the Tower, just how bad her other countrymen had to be faring.

Don't get too far ahead of yourself, she admonished herself. None of them had to cross half the continent in such poor shape. Despite that mental warning, she kept imagining them in the grip of disease, hobbled by improperly healed wounds and freshly inflicted ones...

Pumyra shook her head violently. The horrors of seeing people wounded and sick, and the desire to make said people whole again, were what had driven her to become a healer while Thundera was still her home. On the reverse of that, those same images of the injured and inflicted plagued her thoughts. She had, for the most part, gotten control of her overly active imagination across the years. The current situation seemed to have given those old demons free reign to rampage about her consciousness.

Given the unfortunate and aggravating fact that Thundera had always been under constant threat of invasion, attack, and the general fuckery of Plun-Darr as well as whatever wandering ne'er-do-well which happened to blunder into her homeworld's sector of space, Thunderian medical training had been comprehensive to the point of being nearly overwhelming. The high point of which, and Pumyra took great pride in being an example of this, was that those who made it through the basic courses were supremely well prepared for whatever specialty of medical practice they wished to enter. Pumyra's had been research with an emphasis on genetics, unlocking the secrets of Thunderian potential.

All that had gone to hell in a handbasket once Thundera had been destroyed. Pumyra, while stranded on that island with Lynx-O, Bengali, and the two Berbils who had the goodness in their hearts (or power cores) to pull them off of Thundera just before the last violent tremors and eruptions from the core caused the planet to rip itself apart, had the irrational yet very real feeling in her heart of hearts that she had been cheated.

Having been found by the ThunderCats, and having been named one, had allowed her to at least practice general medicine again, and for that and more she was thankful. Of their own accord, her eyes briefly passed over the cold storage unit in which the samples of healing resin which she had collected from the Guyver were stored. Perhaps she'd have the chance to do some truly groundbreaking research.

First, though, she had a couple hundred Thunderians and a village of Wollos awaiting her care. Once this rescue was done (she did not allow herself to think the word "if") she and Tygra would be busy indeed. Shaking herself from the grip of reverie, Pumyra turned to check on Myrlha and Sho's progress and hid a brief smile.

She has no idea I'm looking right at her, Pumyra thought as she watched the Cougress break from her task for a moment to study Sho's muscled back which the blue suit showed off with a look on her face that was a mix of curiosity, uncertainty, and a bit of good old checking out the goods. Sho remained oblivious as Myrlha went back to the racks of handheld scanners, calibrating them by checking her own vitals as Pumyra had instructed.

Do us all a favor, Sho, Pumyra thought with a hidden smile. Let WilyKit down easy.

Myrlha turned her gaze from Sho's taut back and returned her attention to the medical scanner she held toward her torso. Having no medical training, she had to rely solely on Lady Pumyra's instructions to make sure the instruments were calibrated and working properly.

Focus, girl, she admonished herself. You're got more important things to do than look at Sho. Even so, as she ran another scan on herself (and becoming so familiar with her vitals that she could recite them on command) she found her thoughts drifting maddeningly toward the human. She could not deny, to herself at any rate, that she felt a curiously strong attraction to him. What she could not determine, however, was why. He wasn't Thunderian by any stretch of the imagination, lacking any features that were remotely feline. Even his scent was somewhat bland, nondescript even. Myrlha could not shake the feeling that humans, if Sho were an example, were on the whole unfinished somehow.

His strength, on the other hand, could not be denied. Myrlha doubted the memory of how he had prevented that bone serpent from making a meal of herself and Salvador would lose any of its clarity. In his Guyver form, the human was a force to be reckoned with, that was for sure.

What is it? she asked herself in exasperation. Why am I thinking about him like this?!

She had no definitive answer. Was it the power he possessed? Was it the fact that he had saved her life, not just from the snake but from the pneumonia that had been conspiring to drop her dead? She remembered her hand in his, how she almost reflexively intwined her fingers with his, and that haunted look in his eyes that reached out to a facet of her personality that she hadn't known was there. Something inside had wanted to reach out to him in turn, to let him know that she would share whatever burdens his past placed on him.

Another, more primal part, had wanted to pull him down to her and start kissing him.

At that thought, said primal instinct began to stir and Myrlha forced it down with a quick glance about to make sure no one in the infirmary was seeing the blush which colored her cheeks a furious rose.

She'd had suitors on Thundera. Many she'd rejected, some who had managed to woo her. As a dancer, she was more than used to eyes on her body as she performed routines depicting the great heroes and events in Thunderian history. Bouquets left on vanities in the dressing room had become something many in the Leonid Troupe had finished a performance to find. Myrlha had found more than one arrangement of telma orchids, blood roses, and brilliant violets on her table.

Myrlha wrenched her mind away from the past before she could dwell on the dark times of captivity. It was over, now, done with. All that remained was saving those still in bondage to the Mutants.

Sho failed to notice the quick looks Myrlha had been giving him, appearing to be fully engrossed in his task of sorting and packaging Pumyra's bulk supplies of remedies, splints, bandages, and various other anasthetics and disinfectants. While he dedicated as much effort as he was able into preventing any mix-ups of goods, another part of him dwelled on the battle to come.

One more time, he thought to himself. One more enemy.

It was not so much the Mutants which had him concerned. Nor Grune, for that matter. Savage as the Thunderian traitor seemed to be, Sho knew that Grune was no threat to him.

As was always the case, the harder Sho tried not to think about it, the more determined his mind was to worry it like a puppy with an old strip of rawhide.

Oswald Arthur Lisker. Sho kept trying not to think about Guyver Two, telling himself ostensibly that it was to avoid establishing a link between their minds, to keep him from discovering what they were planning. He even tried the old adage about anticipation being worse than the event.

The simple truth was that Sho was afraid. He didn't fear Lisker himself. For some reason, fear of another was not something that came easily to him. Fear of what would happen to the ThunderCats should he fail this time, to Cheetara, that was an entirely different story.

Oh, stop it! he demanded himself. I won't let anything happen to her. To any of them. I have the power to do that!

Sure you do, a snidely cheerful voice piped up. You're the ever-fucking GUYVER after all! Hey! Hey, remember back then? Huh? Remember telling them that you'd protect them? Where the hell are they now, hmmm?

It's been two thousand years, he thought. Of course they're not here now.

Oh, come on, you know! Ignoring that, Sho glanced over at Myrlha, who was currently scanning herself with another unit, and his eyes took her in before he could stop himself. He snatched his gaze back to the task at hand.

Yeah, she's *hot*, ain't she? that irritating voice returned. *Nice* curves on that one. Wonder what *she'd* think now that you've discarded her. Oh, my bad, you totally forgot, didn't you? Yeah, Mizuki meant a hell of a lot to you, didn't she?

Shut up!

You promised to protect her, too, didn't you? DIDN'T YOU?! Too bad you couldn't keep that promise.

SHUT UP!!!

Or what, you gonna cry? You gonna run to the new Mizuki over there and bury your widdle head in her bosoms? Huh? You gonna beat me up with the Guyver? Hate to tell ya this, slick, but I'm not that easy to get rid of. You couldn't protect them in the end. Not Tetsuro, not Mizuki, and I don't need to remind you of dad! Go ahead, keep thinking things're gonna be different this time. You've brought death to these people just like Second Earth, and it's my job to remind you. And remind you. AND REMIND YOU!! Yes, sir, and I intend to do just that!

Sharp pain in his hands snapped Sho back to reality to find his fists clenched tightly enough to draw his knuckles white. He opened his hands and little weals of blood were spaced along his palms from where his fingernails had broken the skin.

"Sho? Where are you going?"

"Nature calling, Pumyra."

"Well, hurry back."

"Will do," Sho replied, hiding his hands from her. The haunted look which Myrlha had noticed before was back. Pumyra and Myrlha, however, were thankfully too busy to notice.

==========

"Little more... Little more... WHOA! Right there, Lion-O!" The right pod of the ThunderStrike hung in its harness from the ceiling-mounted crane, swaying slightly from momentum as Panthro and Bengali reached into open ports which exposed the inner workings of the vehicle. The main section and the left pod rested on the far end of the hangar, already separated and awaiting work.

Never thought I'd have to do this for a rescue mission, Panthro thought then checked himself. It wasn't just a rescue mission, no way. It was the final strike of a war Mumm-Ra began in order to flush out one human. It was a raid that would erase the rank presence of Plun-Darr from Third Earth.

And, it was about damn time, too.

Panthro had always thought Lion-O too lenient on the Mutants, Slythe in particular, with each past run-in. The Code of Thundera forbade cold-blooded murder, but killing an enemy in battle was another matter all together. The only reason Panthro had held back so much on Third Earth was that, by and large, Slythe and his Mutants had been just shy of pathetic. Dangerous to the natives, sure, but against ThunderCats? No way.

That all changed some months ago, when Mumm-Ra finally pulled out the stops. Panthro had been quietly relieved to find that, in real combat, Lion-O wouldn't back down from deadly force and wouldn't let it bother him afterward. Their enemies weren't playing the same tired games anymore, and neither could the ThunderCats.

Now, most of their enemies were out of the game. And Panthro couldn't be happier about it. After this, their countrymen would be rescued, and then they would all be a people again. The Code of Thundera could grow and flourish again.

"Mind the power converters, Bengali," he said distractedly.

"Between forty and sixty percent. I know."

"Couplings?"

"Aligned and waiting to be put together."

"Readouts from the Feliner's systems?"

"All green. We can attach when ready."

"Good. Proceed." Panthro stepped back as the ThunderStrike's right pod was lowered gently onto the right wing of the Feliner. He and Bengali made several last-second connections before the two bodies joined. One down, two more to go.

Bengali eased back as the pod was lowered onto the wing of the Feliner, the connections he and Panthro had made already fading with the list of things left to do. The two ThunderCats crossed over the Feliner's tail section to the right wing in preparation for Lion-O to hook the other pod of the ThunderStrike to be united with the Feliner.

Bengali had a difficult time not thinking about the strange events which had transpired since they had more or less recruited Sho. Things were unfolding faster and faster now that the Guyver had joined them and Myrlha had found the Tower.

Too fast, he thought, allowing a portion of his mind to focus on Pumyra. She was the center of his life, the yin to his yang. Pumyra balanced him so completely that Bengali could not fathom a life without her sometimes caustic presence. Her remarks, at times gentle and biting, kept him coming back for more of her particular brand of love.

Without her...

Stop it, he commanded himself. The tide of negative thoughts abated briefly as he guided the right pod of the ThunderStrike down to the open ports on the Feliner's wings. Despite the desperate plea he made to himself, he could still see nightmare images of Pumyra falling dead in the coming battle over and over again.

STOP IT! Bengali demanded himself. She WON'T die!

Bengali ignored as best he was able the cold chill which passed through him at the thouht of her dying in the coming fight. Just because the three of them would be in the ThunderStrike, once re-separated from the Feliner, there was no guarantee that a lucky shot form a Nosediver wouldn't...

As the second pod slowly drew closer over the shriek of hydraulics, Bengali forced those thoughts out of his head. Pre-combat jitters, he thought, aren't what I need right now.

In the control seat of the crane, Lion-O checked and rechecked the various gagues. Power level, oil pressure, boom position, and various others just glanced off the surface of his notice. Though he could not know, his thoughts were following a track very similar to Bengali's.

He knew Cheetara would be fine. She was a ThunderCat, and had been for longer. She was an experienced, battle-hardened warrior.

She was also the one he loved. Before that, nothing else seemed to matter as much.

Lion-O moved the second pod into position, his thougths on Cheetara. He tried to tell himself that he didn't need to worry, but that thought held little meaning. Yes, he had seen her in action time and again. Yes, he had seen her face seemingly insurmountable odds and come out on top. But, that had all been before they'd become a couple. That one fact put a whole new spin on his feelings about her facing such dangers.

I can't order her not to go, he thought as Panthro and Bengali began making the digital connections needed before the pod could be fully lowered and the main linkups established. Lord of the ThunderCats or not, I just can't do that to her.

Lion-O found himself facing some rather unexpected and unpleasant facts as he sat before the crane's controls. Cheetara was not a kitten, and did not need him to keep watch over her much as he might wish otherwise. Also, though he had not admitted this to the others, that same wish had been partly what had compelled him to leave her with the kittens when the first attack had begun. He needed no reminder other than the scars on her toned back and the one just below the breasts he'd held for the first time some weeks ago of that.

Is it natural to be this worried? he asked himself. Lion-O suddenly wished she was here to ask. He shook his head in an attempt to clear it. Cheetara was an adult, in many ways moreso than him, and could make her own choices. His role of leader and title of Lord of the ThunderCats could never change that nor give him the right to take the choice from her. He knew that, yet such did nothing to alleviate his concern.

Focus on the here and now, he commanded himself once he saw Panthro waving for him to lower the pod. You'll have a chance to talk to her later. It's not like you don't know where she sleeps.

==========

The sun had nearly set, casting the sky in a fiery hue as the ThunderCats all assembled in the Tower's control chamber for a dinner of sandwiches and to discuss the tactical scenario Tygra and Lynx-O had devised. Tygra was cautiously optimistic about the plan, even though he knew that the odds were stacked terribly against them and it was this sobering note that he began the briefing.

"We know that," Panthro said, "but we don't have any other option than to strike now. If we let the Mutants dig themselves in deeper, what with the numbers and firepower on their side, we simply won't survive another direct assault."

"And," Cheetara added, "you know one's coming sooner or later. Better we strike the blow first."

"I'm all too aware of that," he replied. "I've recently been in contact with Turmagar. He's on his way with fresh troops and heavy weapons for the Gomplins already here." Tygra's fingers worked over the control panel's keyboard and called up the compiled image from the schematics Myrlha had memorized. "Working under the assumption that their radar and sensor nets are operational, we have calculated this point," a small green dot appeared in the hinterlands surrounding the notional Fortress Plun-Darr, "five miles out from the construction site the closest safe distance. The approach will require two days for all of our assets to be in place and ready. Gomplins, unfortunately, simply are not as fast as the Feliner especially with the ThunderStrike equipped to it."

"Just a few minor connections to check," Panthro said once Tygra's gaze fell on him. "Call it an hour. Truth be told, I'm surprised we got it done so fast."

"Truly?" asked Lynx-O.

"Yeah. The first time's usually the worst for a rig-up like this."

"Our first priority," Tygra continued, "is the rescue of our countrymen and the Wollos being held there. Once they're secure, we must get them to the Mutant ships. Once done, we must withdraw. Without their workforce and weaponry, the Mutants will not be able to complete their new fortress. This will leave us, hopefully, ample time to plan and amass resources for a much larger strike against them."

"So, how are we going to pull this off?" Pumyra asked after swallowing a mouthful of meat and bread. All of Snarf's time was being devoted to preparing supplies for their countrymen to eat once rescued. The sandwiches had been the kittens' doing, and they hadn't done a bad job, either.

"What shall carry this battle in our favor will be surprise and air power," Lynx-O explained. "Turmagar's Gomplins will be outfitted with medium-yeild explosives, which shall be dropped upon the ammo dumps," the image then shifted to the layout of the fortress grounds and more green indicators appeared over the mentioned areas to the east of the looming structure, "and the incomplete fortress itself. It is best to remove as much of their firepower and footsoldiers as soon as possible."

"Sho, you will be part of the air assault," Tygra said, looking at the human who sat on an available surface next to Myrlha. Were his mind not so occupied with the coming battle, he would have noticed how her hand fell over his at that statement. "We can expect Lisker to enter the battle postehaste, and it will be best to have you there as soon as possible to counter him."

"Got it," he replied. "I'll keep him busy. But, what about the ThunderClaw and the HoverCat? We'll need all the guns we can get, right?"

"They don't have the range," Panthro explained, "and they can't be mounted on the Feliner. Anchoring the ThunderTank to it is gonna put enough strain on the engines while in atmosphere as is."

"Right." Sho nodded once, his curiosity satisfied.

"The ground assault will consist of the rest of us, Turmagar's soldiers, and the ThunderTank. Remember, we have to hit them fast and hard. We cannot let them organize a defensive front. Sho, once you have dealt with Lisker, if you have enough power we would like for you to give them a parting shot to discourage pursuit."

"The megasmasher, right?"

"That'll do it," Bengali said.

"Sure thing." Tygra could see the unspoken "If I survive Lisker" hanging just above Sho's head.

"What will you have me do?" Myrlha asked, her eyes burning with determination. "I can't stay in the Tower, not will all of them in the hands of those bastards. I have to fight."

"We can't ask you to risk yourself any further," Lion-O replied. "You've done more than enough already..."

"My brother was in the Royal Guard," Myrlha explained, her voice hard. "He taught me a thing or two about weapons and combat. I can fire an energy rifle just as well as any of the Guardsmen could. Please," her words became softer, pleading, "I promised them I'd come back with help, I gave my word. I need to see the Mutants fall."

"We need every pair of capable hands we can get," Tygra said before Lion-O could refuse. With what Myrlha had likely seen and endured in Mutant captivity, he could understand her desire to be part of the assault. Lion-O looked over at him, understanding evident in his posture.

"Very well. You'll man the rear turret of the ThunderTank. Panthro can teach you how to operate it on the way there."

"Thank you, Majesty," she said with a deep bow of her head and shoulders. "Thank you."

"It's pretty simple, really," Panthro said, drawing her attention. "Just aim and shoot. You oughtta have no trouble."

"Turmagar should arrive in another hour," Tygra said as he brought the briefing to a close. "We depart at first light." On a rare impulse, Tygra extended his hand, palm down. Lion-O followed suit, placing his atop Tygra's, then the other ThunderCats did likewise.

"Sho, Myrlha," Cheetara said, "you're part of this too." Myrlha approached, slightly nervous while Sho's eyes widened in surprise. His hand, smaller and unclawed, rested atop the others in an act he hadn't seen since Second Earth.

"If we're gonna do it," Panthro began.

"Then let's do it!" everyone shouted together.

==========

It was the close of the day and, despite the weariness Cheetara knew that sleep would not come easily as she sat on the edge of the bed she shared with Lion-O. Tomorrow, the battle would end. One way or the other, the madness Mumm-Ra instigated would be settled. Cheetara thought back to his last appearance, when an out of control Guyver reduced him to his component molecules with what everyone had come to call the megasmasher. She could not think of a better name for that horrific weapon. She found herself concerned for Sho, whose task it was to do battle with Guyver Two directly. She'd had front row seats to their last encounter, and she couldn't help but feel some dread over Sho's chances as she pulled her leotard down to her waist and bent to remove her boots. The strong presence of Lion-O's hand on her back pushed those concerns well away as he stroked her exposed spotted skin.

"Now's really not the time," she said, his caress sending electric jolts of pleasure through her. He remained silent, she could practically feel the contemplative stare on her back. It wasn't arousal, she knew. "What is it?"

"I made a bad decision," he began, his voice thick, "and these scars are the result."

"Huh?" Cheetara turned to face him, her outfit still half-removed. She saw the emotions working his face in several directions at once. Lion-O was still a bit uneasy when it came to discussing his inner feelings, but at least he was making a real effort.

"Back then," he began, "when I had you stay with Snarf and the kittens..." She tamped down the urge to interrupt him, to tell him it wasn't his fault. Better that he get it all out. "It wasn't just to guard the Lair."

"Go on," she said, placing her hands on his shoulders.

"I wanted to keep you safe. I wanted you safe, and look what happened. I... I know you don't need me to keep watch over you, but with what we're going into tomorrow, I..."

"Lion-O." Her gaze hardened, indignation beginning to bubble up inside.

"Please, just let me say this. I know you're a warrior, Cheetara, I know you can handle yourself in a fight as well or better than most. I've seen it too many times not to know that. But, we weren't together then. My feelings for you are a lot stronger, now, and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't worried about what could happen to you."

"I know you are," she replied, the approaching anger fading. Remember, she told herself, this isn't easy for him. Perhaps it never would be, but so long as he'd make the effort, she'd be there to hear it. "Believe me, I'm worried about what could happen to you as well, Lord of the ThunderCats aside." She slid over to him, her slender arms encircling his powerful form and nearly melted into his returned embrace. "It's only natural to feel like this, Lion-O, especially with what we'll be facing. But remember, I'm not some delicate piece of artwork that you have to keep protected on your shelf."

"I know. I'll never insult you by ordering you away from the action."

"That's good, Lion-O," she said warmly. "Just keep in mind that I'm a ThunderCat first. You can't let what you feel for me get in the way of making hard choices."

"Tygra said something to me a while back," Lion-O said, his voice stirring her hair. "He told me the course of love never does run smooth."

"He'd know," she said, unintentionally.

"Huh?"

"Never mind," she said. "Those words are true enough, Lion-O. There'll be times when we aren't happy with each other, even completely angry with each other. The important thing is that together, we can get through the hard times."

"Thanks for letting me get that out," he said as they parted. His eyes, she noticed, still held some hint of worry. She knew hers did as well.

"You're more than welcome. Now, let's get some sleep." Slumber claimed her sooner than she thought possible.

==========

"I know what you're thinking, Bengali," Pumyra said as they entered their quarters. Bengali halted, the doorway sliding shut behind him. He played it off, not wanting to irritate her.

"That I want to kiss you right now?" he asked lightly, knowing inside that he couldn't fool her.

"Aside from that," she said, staring directly into his eyes.

Yep, he thought, can't fool her for a second.

"Listen to me, I know I'm more of a healer than a warrior, but I'll be okay out there."

"I know. That won't stop me from worrying about you, but I know." Her face softened, that smile which won his heart showing beneath the weariness. "We should get to bed. Big day tomorrow."

"Yeah. Best get as much sleep as we can. I have a feeling we won't be getting much of it for the next two days."

"Are you feeling okay?" he asked, seeing the strange look in her eyes.

"Just tired. Spent the whole day pretty much packing my entire stock onto the Feliner. Good thing Myrlha and Sho were around to help."

"Yeah, good thing, huh?" Bengali could not help but feel that there was something unsaid between them, and for the life of him he had no idea what it was. "Is something wrong?"

"No. Not at all. Good night."

"Good night," he replied as they entered their bedroom. Something was wrong, alright. Bengali set it aside as they prepared for bed. For the moment, there were other fish to fry.

Pumyra settled beneath the sheets in the dark, wondering how to tell him. She had managed to keep her condition quiet as symptoms were only beginning to manifest, and would not interfere with her duties for a short while yet. She was in the first stages, and not yet in danger of being hampered.

Then, why not tell him? an inner voice asked bluntly. He deserves to know.

She didn't want to give Bengali even more to worry about. This sudden and unexpected development with the Mutant Army, not to mention the Thunderians in their captivity, had taken precedence over everything else. She wasn't keeping it from him.

A sudden wave of cold fear washed over her, the thought of Bengali dying in the coming battle, not knowing about the cub growing within her banishing her approaching slumber and sending her pulse racing. She forced her mind off of that disastrous track with considerable effort.

"Bengali?" she asked, suddenly so close to telling him, further worry or not.

"Yeah?"

"Be careful. Please."

"You, too. I love you, you know that."

"I do, and I love you, too." Please, she prayed, let everyone come through this one alive. Please.

==========

(I'll keep you safe.)

The words echo in his mind as his footfalls echo in the claustrophobic metal optimization facility, taunting him. Mocking him as he ignores the glass cylinders which line the floorspace in neat rows, each filled with a greenish-blue fluid and housing in various stages of development men and women who were undergoing the transformation from human to zoanoid. They mean nothing to him, all except one.

He charges headlong, not even noticing the Kronos researchers who wisely decide that getting in his way is tantamount to a death sentence. Never before has such rage, a white-hot nova of pure anguished hate, exploded into being within him. Not her, he thinks in a desperate plea. Please, God, not her too!

Please don't let me fail Mizuki, too!

The facility seems to stretch into eternity, his goal distant and unattainable, until he sees her and a choked sob emanates from the sonic orbs on his faceplate which grows into a roar as his fist smashes open the optimization tank to spill her naked and deformed body onto the floor in a rush of some perversion of placenta.

"Oh..." Kneeling beside her, his enhanced eyesight confirms his worst fear in a way that the obvious partial transformation does not. He is too late. Though free from the process, enough of it has taken hold for such immediate cessation to be fatal.

Her limbs are far too long, one foot ending in a taloned appendage reminiscent of a bird. Scales, pink and covered with something oddly like mucus, cover her abdomen and right breast and her face! Her FACE! One side of it is twisted in mutation, a closed eye bulging under pinkish flesh.

"Mizuki..." His heart lurches again as she stirs at her name, looking up at him with one eye human and the other zoanoid. Both light up at the sight of his armored body, filling with an emotion he does not want to acknowledge, he does not deserve after such a complete failure. Alive, he thinks, oh, God, alive! The notion holds no joy, no relief, only more pain than his overabused mind and soul feel they can take. The Guyver's eyes show him her fading bio-energy, all coalescing into her now-mismatched eyes.

"Knew... you'd come..." her voice is barely a whisper, yet he hears it all too clearly. He wants her to hate him, to despise him for ending her life just by being, by finding the damned Guyver years ago. He wants her to hate him, because the love and forgiveness in her eyes sears his heart.

"Oh, God, I'm so sorry..."

"Promise..." she says, and he knows that her time is gone yet she still holds on, refusing the reaper as her stare bores into him. "Promise me... Never give in..."

"Mizuki..."

"Noh... no... promise me... Please..." He looks into her eyes and he knows she will not let go until he does. Even as she breaks down on the genetic level, as each strand of her DNA unravels, she will not go until she has his word. Even after this, she still believes in him.

"I promise, Mizuki." She smiles at him, that sweet little twist of her lips that he has known since childhood, since before Kronos' shadow darkened first their lives then blanketed the world. The light fades, she fades, and her eyes close for the final time, slipping away from the madness and pain of the past few years. Her fight is over, and he stands outside himself, watching his armored form scream out his rage, sure that he will never stop.

The world pivots on that point, swirling into a whirlpool of darkness so complete that light is less than nothing, and he stands at the edge staring in. It would be so easy, he thinks, to just give it all up. Just surrender to the madness and go out in a blaze of senseless glory, to be with them all to be with her, her...

(You've looked long enough.)

He knows the voice, another whom he failed, yet he hears the truth in those words. His promise is no less binding now.

(When you stare long into an abyss, the abyss stares back into you.)

Did she know? he wonders. Did she know that her last act in life would save mine over and over?

(In the small hours, when the dark was deepest and your resolve weakest...)

Her voice, he recalls, pulled me from the edge. He hears the howling from its depths, sounding so much like them, all of them, down there waiting.

(A lie.)

Yes. He would give the dead their due, he would lay their ghosts to rest. But, not that way. He will not give in.

(Good. Let the dead rest. Your duty is to the living.)

He looks up, on the other side of the yawning rip in the floor of existence, to see them standing there with welcoming eyes. Yes. They are his friends, now. He will fight for them. From their ranks, a woman steps to the fore and he cannot help the twinge of guilt when his heart begins to race.

(Your duty is to the living.)

The living. Myrlha.

Sho rose from his bed, unsurprised that the sun had yet to present itself in Third Earth's sky. Third Earth, he thinks for a moment, a new chance for an old young man. Something flutters at the edges of his consciousness, a notion about the world he now called home, yet is gone before he can even try to grab for it. He padded to the lone window and looked for any familiar constellations. Orion was barely within the slice of pre-dawn sky his window afforded.

I did it, he thought, resting his head against the cool glass. I fought to the end, Mizuki. I had the strength because of you.

"Thank you," he said, briefly closing his eyes. "Watch over me, everyone." He never had the chance to tell Mizuki how he really felt about her, but he thought somehow that she knew anyway. His thoughts drifted to Myrlha, to the immediate and powerful attraction that hit him on first sight. He did not want to acknowledge it, yet he could not help but find immesurable elation and pleasure whenever her hand made contact with his.

My duty is to the living, he said to himself. Even so, the memory of Mizuki refused to fully go away. He felt, on some deep level, that he was betraying her memory somehow with his thoughts of Myrlha.

He could not deny it. Sho knew that he had already fallen in love with her, but had no clue how it had happened. The resurfaced memory returned, bearing a meaning which he had been either unable or unwilling to see so long ago.

The promise had not been her true goal, he realized. Not entirely. Her wish had not been so simple as that. She had been begging, he realized in the pre-dawn darkness.

She had been begging for him to fully, finally, let her go.

Had she known, so long ago? he mused as he dressed in his last clean one-piece blue outfit. Could she have known, in those last minutes, what his own fate would be? Every rational sense told him it was impossible. Yet, here he was facing it.

We were never meant to be, Sho thought, saddened and elated all at once. Mizuki, the girl he'd liked before he'd even liked girls, was now long dead. Her last words to him had given him the strength to keep fighting until the bitter end. And, here and now, his vow to her in those last moments kept him going despite the centuries that separated Now from Then. As he prepared to join the ThunderCats in the battle for their enslaved countrymen, for the fate of the Wollos whom had been captured, for maybe the future of the whole damned planet, he felt a great chasm in his heart finally begin to fill. Resignation was finally dispelled by determination and raw anger at the Mutants for all they had done. Myrlha's name flitted across his mind, followed by Mizuki's long-ago plea to let her go, to let her pass in peace.

"Myrlha," he muttered as he emerged into the corridor just ahead of Snarf's waiting knock. The smaller being stared up at him, no words passing between them. Best to get this over with. Sho's mind shifted gears effortlessly, bringing up a thundering guitar riff along with drums and other

accompaning instruments in a heavy metal barrage which he was rather familiar with, all the better to focus himself.

Sho knew the way to the hangar and did not need to follow Snarf as the music swelled and surged in his blood. The smooth walls passed by unnoticed as he keyed himself up for battle. He knew his enemy, the only one whose power matched his. He would not fail this time. No matter what.

Some words he remembered from that American rock song surfaced as he encountered Loin-O and Cheetara fresh from their chambers. He nodded once, the two of them returning the gesture, and only half followed the brief conversation.

Sho had never been more ready for a fight, not since....

(Alkanphel)

... his battle with the First One, the true, and most powerful, Zoalord. He had overcome that immense power. He did not know how, but that would not matter. Lisker was just another enemy, another threat to the weak and innocent to be removed. The sorrow begun by the Guyver would end by the Guyver.

His feet on autopilot, he emerged into the hangar in which the combined Feliner/ThunderStrike resided. The ThunderTank had been attached to its underbelly, the entire setup looking like a weird conglomeration of cat-themed firepower. The rest had already gathered, impatient to get underway as Turmagar reported his forces ready to go. The final refrain, the only words Sho ever clearly recalled from that ancient example of rock music, rang clear and true and he had to force himself to keep them inside.

He gave a grim smile. The madness would end.

Let the bodies hit the floor...

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Preparations: Unknown

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The hyperdrive unit detached, following its own preset program and maintained a parallel orbit to the observation satellite it had carried through what science termed hyperspace but could not truly classify. The unfiltered light of the system's core star washed across its black solar absorbing panels, briefly highlighting the unknown language which identified it. Translated, the symbols would read "SpyStar - 01".

The pointed front of the satellite spread apart like a hideous metal flower to expose sensor arrays and image recorders and propulsion booms folded out along the sides and bottom. Passive sensor

arrays scanned for mechanical energy, charged particles, and various other forms of functional technology. It checked the data for this planet, Third Earth, and confirmed that no advanced technology had developed there. The first reading came from the eastern edge of one of the continents far below, and the limited A.I. fired the proper thrusters in a short burn while the planet's gravity did the rest. It reversed thrust, coming slowly to a halt far above the site of the readings and made an intensive scan.

Inside, several monitor systems classified the unfinished structure and gathered Mutants on the ground with four distinctly Plun-Darrian designed ships outside the main construction site. The Marauder group which had failed to check in had been located. The data was stored and passive sensor arrays detected an airborne vehicle closing on the area.

Main sensors adjusted and found the unknown craft speeding over the ground at high altitude. No match was found in its logs, but the design conformed to Thunderian building themes. The presence of the ThunderCats on this world was confirmed. It had no clue, and no way to care if it did, that this information was highly classified not by Plun-Darr High Command, but by one Mutant. It also did not know or care about the fact that, if this Mutant's hiding of such knowledge was ever detected, that one would be skinned alive and a fleet dispatched to stamp out the ThunderCats once and for all.

Hours passed as the satellite maneuvered just above the atmosphere, seeking out the known coordinates of the location titled "Cat's Lair". It logged that the location appeared to have been destroyed, yet found another example of Thunderian architecture. The systems were highly advanced, and the SpyStar employed another of its directives. On making contact via low energy pulse with the comm system of the spire below, it flash-uploaded a digital worm cluster into the tower's main systems. When a certain time was reached, it would copy and upload, in smaller parcels, any and all information stored within. It would take time, but time meant nothing to a machine.

A countdown began until the mission could be deemed complete and the hyperdrive unit would merge with it once more. It maneuvered itself back across the heavens in the exact path it had previously taken. Data on Primor's force had to be collected as well, and the onboard A.I. calculated a 97% probability of a coming battle.

It would be watching.

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In the Next Episode:

The explosive clash between ancient enemies on a world not their own will decide the outcome of the war begun by Mumm-Ra. Lisker's plan gets fully underway, and a newly-freed Laheela must convince the ThunderCats to follow. Will an uneasy alliance between Guyver One and Guyver Two be forged? Will Lisker's plan to free all those enslaved come off?

Win or lose, the unknown satellite far above will be watching.

All this and more in the next episode of One Last War to Fight.