ThunderCats

Bio-Booster Armor Guyver

One Last War to Fight

Episode Twenty-Five: The Fight for Their Freedom, Part One

By Knight Writer

T Minus Twenty Hours

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The sun had been in the sky merely three hours when he felt it once more, the oncoming presence of Guyver One creeeping closer and closer. Lisker knew the geography of his homeland well, and could esitmate their newest point of departure to be somewhere around the area in which the White House once stood. ThunderCats camping out at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, not even the most hackneyed of Hollywood writers could have come up with that! Presidents from George Washington to Bill Clinton were spinning in their graves!

Oswald Arthur Lisker did not let any of this show as Maria dressed herself on the opposite side of the room. He kept his expression stony, forcing his mind back onto the plan. Time was becoming critical, now, and he had to nudge things in the proper direction. Even so, he found himself casting eyes over the slowly dressing Wollo, and recalling the softness and love she brought to the bed in which they slept. Her movements seemed exaggerated, as if she wanted to arouse him yet again. She was so good at that...

Maria donned her jacket, which had become her only garment, and caught Lisker checking her out from the corner of his eye. She wiggled a little at his scrutiny, amused at how he flinched away. They were more than just a couple, now, they were bonded and she knew he sensed it as well. Their furtive glances at each other only furthered that thought.

The presence of Laheela had been, all in all, rather pleasant.

Over the past two days, the two women had gotten to know each other. Not in the way she and Lisker had come to know each other, but such was irrelevant. Both knew the plan, having gone over it several times. They had come together over the passing days, and Laheela had begun to warm to Lisker in some small ways. They had only needed to appear subservient once, when Grune had shown up to ask about the ThunderCats. Lisker had lied to him brilliantly, saying that the other Thunderians were only just starting preparations for an assault. Maria and Laheela knew better, and in that knowledge they had taken great satisfaction.

"Lisker?" she asked, looking at his hard expression. She loved him, she trusted him, yet sometimes still had trouble reading his moods. With a Wollo it would have been no problem, but she still had little experience with humans other than him. She crossed the spartan chamber and knelt at the foot of the bed. His face was as rock, eyes closed in concentration. "What's wrong? Lisker..."

"Today," he said abruptly, snapping his eyes open. Startled, Maria flinched ever so slightly. His body melted into a more relaxed state, yet his eyes were still hard. "I gotta admit, I didn't think this part would be so damn hard." In what seemed to her eyes a single move, Lisker bounded up and wrapped his arms about her in a fierce embrace and kissed her with an equal fervor.

"...Lisker..." she gasped once their lips parted, breathless. "Isn't it too early for this?"

"Consider it for good luck," he replied as he stared meaningfully into her eyes.

"Oh." Maria shivered, a strange compound of exhilaration and fear pouring into her blood. "They are here already?"

"They'll be close enough tonight, if I'm doing my math right. I've gotta pull one more over on Grune, and then everything'll be ready."

"You've slowed down their preparations," she said hopefully. "Still, I've gotten used to not being chained once more." She did not bother to add the word "physically". Her heart, she knew, would always be bound to his.

"I hate the fact that you will be again," he said, tracing a finger along the line of her jaw. She was less feral than some other Wollos, softer featured and more human-like. "But it won't be for long."

"It does help that I have the keys," she said with a trill of pleasure at his touch. Never would she have thought to find love with a human, not before all this. A silver lining was a silver lining, after all. "Good thing he left the transfer in your hands."

"Yeah. Still, I have to make sure the Mutants see you with the others. They know better than to question me, but I really can't have them talking among each other."

"When?" Maria asked, resigned to being chained again, but buoyant in the knowledge that it would not be for long, and at the end of it everyone would be free.

"Around sundown," he said in response. "Once it gets completely dark, I'll be better able to sneak Laheela out of here." He rose from the bed, then, tension clear in his tight body.

Laheela stretched her lithe body on the hard bench before rising to meet yet another anxious day. While her new sleeping space was just as hard as the pallet Primor had forced her to sleep on night after night as his pet, the bench was far preferable. Even the nervous thrumming in her veins was better than the days of placid resignation at her routine of serving him in whatever

humiliating and painful manner Primor wished. Waiting for Lisker's plan to fully begin, waiting for the ThunderCats, for the first time since Thundera's destruction she actually felt alive. She was becoming a person once more instead of a doll, an object at the disposal of a cruel owner.

Like an often read and well loved document, Laheela unfolded the memory of seeing that fist of earth and rock crushing the life out of Primor, his head falling to the ground, and flinging his corpse into that strange energy barrier of Mumm-Ra's creation. That was when it began, her transformation into a living, breathing Thunderian once again. She carefully refolded and stored that memory when the door to Maria and Lisker's bedchamber slid open.

Laheela looked at them and marvelled at how they actually loved each other. From outside, they seemed so damned *wrong*, yet seeing them together one could think they were meant for each other. Laheela chose not to comment on Maria's, to her, questionable taste in men. Despite what she had seen of him and what Maria had told her, Laheela still did not fully trust Lisker. She supposed that would come only if (when, damnit, think positive for once!) all of the slaves here were freed. Maybe.

"Laheela," Maria said, walking toward her with a determined cast to her face. She noticed how it always seemed to be the Wollo who spoke to her first, as though she were a courier between them. Laheela had to admit, it was easier to speak to Maria than it was to Lisker. He probably knew that, too.

"Good morning," she said, smiling and meaning it. She had come to really like the Wollo. "What is it?"

"Tonight," she replied meaningfully, and Laheela's heart began to beat faster.

"They're close?"

"Unless I miss my guess," Lisker said, snapping her eyes to him, "they'll be within striking range tonight. I've got to get all the slaves aboard by sundown."

"Where do I hide out?"

"In here. Once night falls, I'll get you clear of this place. You'll have a bit of a run, but I can't get too close to them."

"Or the other Guyver?"

"Pretty much. I can't take the chance of him tumbling to the fact that I'm close by."

"How do you know where he is?" she asked, genuinely curious. "Are you reading his thoughts?" Lisker blew a sigh between his teeth before answering.

"He's blocking me from his thoughts, but I can still feel his presence."

"Then we'll soon see how genuine you are," she replied, ignoring the twitch of Maria's jaw. They had decided not to speak of Lisker to each other. There was simply no point.

"Before I forget," he said, reaching into his hip pocket and pulling out three identical circular devices. Each was colored a flat black, with a clear hemisphere of plastic atop them. "These signalers are all linked." Lisker handed one to Maria, who stared at it quizzically, and then stepped closer to give the second to her. "Laheela, once you've gotten the ThunderCats to at least send some of their forces to the ships, press the switch on top. Five minutes after that, I'll start giving the Mutants something to think about. Maria, that's when you do your thing."

"I understand."

Laheela looked first to Lisker, then to Maria, and back again before shaking her head in disbelief.

"And you really think you can take all of them on?"

"No. I know I can."

Despite her misgivings concerning him, Laheela found herself convinced of at least that.

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T Minus Eighteen Hours

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While not as fast as the Feliner, Lion-O was surprised at just how well Turmagar's Gomplins had kept up, especially the larger ones which were carrying his soldiers. The propeller-driven engines, which Panthro had despaired of reaching the campsite anytime near sunrise, had been replaced with miniature turbine engines which had allowed the strange beasts to stay within a mile or two of the Felliner at most times. The fact that he kept the throttles away from the stops didn't hurt, either.

"Sleep well?" Tygra asked, approaching from the smothered remains of the campfire with a cup of reheated coffee in each hand. Lion-O accepted one and managed not to grimace when the brew went down.

"More or less," he replied. "Are we all ready?"

"Almost. Is something bothering you?"

"Just anxious. Everything's riding on this one."

"We will overcome," Tygra replied, clapping him on the shoulder with his free hand. "We all have faith in you, and in this plan."

"The plan was yours and Lynx-O's," Lion-O said. "I trust the two of you."

"Grune will be there," Tygra said suddenly, all seriousness.

"I know," Lion-O said in response, "and he'll want another shot at me."

"Remember why we're doing this. Whatever..."

"I won't risk everything just for a chance to get him back." Lion-O stared directly into Tygra's gaze unflinchingly. "This rescue is far more important than settling any kind of personal score. I know that, Tygra, and if Grune wants me, he'll have to come to me."

"That's good to hear," the other ThunderCat said with a small smile and a relieved sigh. "We'll be departing soon, best to get aboard."

"Thinking the deep thoughts?"

Sho turned to look at Panthro, who stared down at him with a slight smirk that he had come to know well.

"Trying to avoid one, really," he said.

"Lisker."

"That's the one." Sho let out a frustrated breath, leaning back against the Feliner's landing gear. "Keeping him on my mind's not gonna help anything, but he keeps popping up." And, my mental song library's not very extensive, he did not add.

"I understand how nervous you've gotta be," Panthro said gravely. "I don't envy you that."

"Doesn't matter," Sho said, keeping his face as neutral as he could. "He's my problem. I have to deal with him. On the upside, keeping him busy won't take much effort."

"Really? What makes you say that?"

"Lisker's main enemy is me. Aside from Cheetara, he doesn't much care about the ThunderCats. He's probably gonna spend all of his time duking it out with me."

"I haven't been able to teach you much," Panthro said with a shake of his head.

"It'll have to be enough. If I can fight him off, I should be able to give the Mutant Army that parting shot you asked me about."

"Think you'll have enough juice left to use it?" Panthro asked, meaning the megasmasher.

"Maybe not at full blast," Sho replied, "but enough to give them the worst black eye in history."

"Has he been..." Panthro tapped the side of his scalp with a finger.

"No, I've shut down any links between us, especially since that dream..." Sho hesitated, the details of that nightmare having finally faded. "He blindsided me once, and it's kinda bugged me off and on."

"What?!" Panthro's eyes widened at the thought that the element of surprise was lost.

"It was an emotion, a powerful one," Sho explained, and Panthro's tense muscles relaxed a little. "I've been telling myself that it can't be what I think it was."

"And that is...?"

"He felt love toward someone."

"You're kidding."

"No, I felt it. Damn near made me drop the tray I was carrying to Myrlha that night, it was so intense." Kind of like what I felt when I first saw Myrlha, he realized suddenly. Was it possible...? "I guess I'd better accept it. Lisker's fallen in love with a... with someone."

"With a... who, exactly?"

"It's not important. I got a name, but..."

"Chilla."

"Uh, no. It was Maria." Sho resigned himself to having to relate what he knew, regardless of how unimportant or unusual it was. He was not a talented liar.

"Maria?" Panthro asked, confused. "That sounds kinda like a Wollo name." Sho kept a meaningful look on his face as Panthro looked back at him. Understanding bloomed in seconds. "A Wollo?"

"Surprised the hell out of me, too."

"A Wollo and a human... you said he actually loves her?"

"Yeah. Weird."

"Weird. Weird's... a word."

"I'm pretty sure the feeling's mutual," Sho went on. "Seemed that way to me."

"Anything else you managed to get from him?" Panthro asked. The look on his face broadcast that he hoped it was something more vital than Oswald Lisker's love life.

"That was pretty much it. Sorry."

"Don't beat yourself up," Panthro said with a firm grip on Sho's shoulder.

"Because that's your job, right?" Sho asked with an impish wink.

"You got that right, kid." Panthro's answering smile. A small bit of levity before the battle, it was something Sho found himself to be quite familiar with.

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T Minus Fifteen Hours

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"So, they've finally decided to come," Grune said around a wicked sneer. "They've just left their tower?"

"Earlier today."

Grune studied Lisker carefully for any sign of deception as the two sat across from eachother in the barely-finished control center of Fortress Plun-Darr. Several wide patches of the walls were yet uncovered, revealing the skeletal gridwork of metal in glaring swaths. Monitor systems were in place, their screens black until power could be pumped in through conduits which were still coiled along the eastern wall. Grune knew it was a pathetic shadow of a stronghold, and part of him seethed that the ThunderCats should launch an assault before it was finished. Once they were crushed, he would make a point of finding the two escapees. They would suffer slowly. Lisker simply sat there, his face neutral, posture relaxed and loose. Either the human was telling the truth, or he was a damn fine actor.

"Can I count on your assistance?"

"How else would you be able to withstand an assault by a Guyver?" Lisker asked. "Even with a weak and untrained host, its power would lay waste to your Mutant Army."

"I don't doubt that," Grune said, barely hiding a shiver.

"You seem to have a healthy respect for Guyvers," Lisker asked casually.

"I know power when I see it." His tone was sharper than he'd intended. Grune brought himself back under control. He would not let this human see him as anything but the picture of calm. "How long?"

"Three days or so. Plenty of time to prepare."

"Especially with the slaves to help."

"I advise against that."

"Why?" What is it about them that so interests you? Grune added silently.

"Do you want them anywhere near your weapons? When they see the Mutants setting up defenses, they'll put two and two together pretty fast. The Wollos are bound to have told the Thunderians about those ThunderCats being on this planet."

"And, they'll realize that rescue is coming. I see. When will you move them?"

"Sundown. The sooner they're well away from the preparation area, the better."

"Something still bothers me," Grune said, leaning back in his seat and crossing his ankles on a dormant control panel. "Why are you so solicitous to them? They're slaves, for crying out loud!"

"They're also your primary workforce," Lisker explained with an exasperated groan. "They can work faster if they're kept better. It's a simple management technique."

"Slaves are disposable, and this planet is rife with replacements." Whatever bug Lisker had up his ass about the slaves, Grune wanted to find out. "It's the Wollo, isn't it? I noticed you keeping an eye on her even before you claimed her as your own." And, the Mutants hadn't liked that one damn bit. "Whatever she does for you, surely you'll become bored with her?"

Oh, shit, Lisker thought, keeping his face an impassive mein. He's trying to steer me. This, he knew, was where the whole ante was at stake.

"Already have," he lied. He even managed not to grimace. "She'll be with the others in the holds. She was fun, though." Lisker's voice was offhanded, even while his stomach wanted to turn somersaults at saying these things about Maria.

"To be discarded so quickly," Grune said, shaking his head. Lisker noticed how keen the Thunderian's gaze was, however. He was searching for any sign that something was up. "I didn't think you'd use her up so fast."

"Get it, hit it, quit it, forget it," he said back and shrugged. "The way it has to be when you're dealing with women." To think, Lisker mused, I actually believed that once. Thank you, Maria.

"I can relate." Grune's words were like silk, too smooth. Lisker realized that he wasn't entirely convinced. "So, what of your new toy? Does she do for you what a Wollo can't?"

You have no idea what Maria's done for me, you piece of shit, Lisker struggled not to say.

"She's a rather talented young woman," Lisker said instead, fighting to keep from tensing up, from releasing the anger that was coming to a fast boil in his heart. The plan could not afford for Grune to interpret that as signs of treachery. To kill Grune right now would be so easy, yet would make sneaking Laheela out tonight that much more difficult. A leader had to stay in the eyes of

the troops, after all. "She does this thing with her hips and thigh muscles that can untwist your DNA if you're not careful." The flash of curiosity and the tone of Grune's next words eased Lisker's temper somewhat. The Thunderian's curiosity was nearly slaked.

"I might wish to try her out myself, then, if she's so skilled."

"You were right about Thunderian women," Lisker said, "once you go cat you never go back." Grune's roaring laughter echoed off of the curved walls, the man himself holding his stomach above his spiked belt in hysterics. Lisker forced a chuckle out, when he truly wanted to vomit. How easy such sexist banter had once been to him, in the barracks of the Second Marine Expeditionary Unit, in locker rooms at a Kronos gym that reeked of sweat, even in bars on nights out with associates when spirits ran high on more than one level. Assuring themselves of their manliness, their own prowess with the fairer sex. Lisker now knew better, two thousand years later and had learned from a woman who was not even human.

Fate has a fucked up sense of humor, he thought to himself, letting the smile it brought come to his lips. The last trace of suspicion faded from Grune's eyes, and Lisker's smile grew broader at the sheer irony. His earlier plan of claiming to have killed Laheela for resisting him was now moot. Even if she were noticed missing from the Thunderian compliment of slaves, and even if Grune tumbled onto his plan becaue of it, the bastard would be far too late to prevent anything.

"This may come as a surprise," Grune said, waving a hand at a tray to his right which bore a bottle and two metal flasks. Lisker shook his head slightly in refusal. He would not be taken in that easily.

"I don't partake." With the web of deception he'd woven, what was one more strand, especially one this small? Grune shrugged as if to say "Your loss", and picked up a flask. That answered the question of which held the poisoned brew.

"You're not the first to come to that conclusion," Grune said after downhousing the flask.

"Given the charms of Thunderian women, that's not surprising at all. Either way, we'd best step up preparations." Lisker rose, nodding toward Grune's relaxed form before taking his leave. He trod through the rough halls of Fortress Plun-Darr with a measured step, going over the varaibles once more.

There had been more of those than he'd considered. The fact that his plan was close to fulfillment was the result of either blind chance or divine providence. Either way, the threshold was now reached. Chilla was no longer an issue, and he'd won Grune's trust enough to ensure that his betrayal would not be noticed until too late. All the pieces of this little chess match were in place, and the game was his.

(You're a good man, Oswald Lisker.)

Yeah, he said to that strange inner voice which had taken Maria's tone. A good man who uses lies and stealth to do what's right. I'm no superhero, not like you want me to be.

So what? he thought. If I'm a good man now, that's just fine. No one said I had to be a champion for truth, justice, and the American way. Besides, I'd look ridiculous in blue tights and a red cape.

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T Minus Ten Hours

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It was unavoidable. The subject would now be breached, though Maria did not relish the thought. The small talk had dried up in the hours since Lisker had revealed that the ThunderCats would be there this very night.

"I know you don't trust him," the Wollo said, hands raised in a placating gesture.

"You're right. I don't," Laheela said from the opposite end of the bench. Her hands were clasped between her spread knees, wringing in anxious tension. "I don't see how you can, either."

"I love him," Maria said simply. "He rescued me the same as he did you. Why can you not put more trust in him?"

"Since Thundera was lost," the other woman said, "I've been through more than my fair share of shit. Living like that tends to jade you."

"What will it take?"

"All of us being freed. That'll be a good start."

"Once we are free of this place," Maria began, "it won't matter what you think of him. Laheela," Maria slid closer, placing her left hand on her shoulder while the right cupped the Thunderian's chin and turned her face to meet her eyes, "Lisker only asks that you trust him enough to help make this rescue happen."

"And, that's only as far as I trust him. Hell, Maria, I may be trusting him too much as it is."

"I don't envy you."

"What a coincidence. I don't envy me, either."

"It's not like you have to stay with us," Maria said. "Once this is over, you'll be with the others again. Lisker and I will have our own life. You may never see us again."

"I know. But, after all this, the thought that freedom could be so close, it seems too good to be true."

"Once you are free, you will know that it is not too good to be true." Maria closed her eys briefly, not releasing Laheela just yet. "So much pain you must have felt."

"You have no idea, and I hope you never do."

Maria opened her eyes at Laheela's words, and almost flinched at the anguish she saw in the Thunderian's eyes. She acted on a nuturing instinct which Lisker had awakened in her. Maria's arms encircled Laheela, her lips placing a small kiss at the corner of her mouth.

Laheela went rigid at the feel of Maria's brief contact with her lips, then relaxed as she took in the kindness of the smaller woman. She had been starved for such simple acts of reassurance and affection and returned the Wollo's hug with one of her own.

"If Lisker really does love you," she said, "I'm beginning to see why."

"Laheela?"

"Don't get the wrong idea," she said with a light chuckle. "You really are such a loving person, and to keep that part of yourself in this place... You're stronger than you appear, Maria."

"Thank you."

Laheela kept the embrace for as long as she could, pure and simple care acting as a balm for her wounded heart. Success or failure, however the plan worked out she would miss Maria when all was said and done.

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T Minus Nine Hours

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Airborne once more, Pumyra could nearly feel Fortress Plun-Darr coming ever nearer as the Feliner crossed wild country that Myrlha had managed on foot with Salvador. Looking down at the rugged terrain distracted her, a seemingly random conglomeration of greens, browns, reds and blues that looked so insignificant when seen from altitude. On this wild and untamed world, her and Bengali's cub would be born.

Assuming I survive. The thought squeaked past her control. Pumyra gripped the armrests of her seat even tighter, breathing in slow and deep breaths. Her heart began to slow to its normal pace at last, her white-knuckled grip relaxing gradually. She reviewed the facts once more, attempting to reassure herself.

I'm in the first stages, she thought as if by rote, I don't need the handle-with-care treatment yet. The cub's still a zygote, not a fetus. I'll be in the ThunderStrike, not on the ground. For Jaga's sake, girl, get a grip!

The self-admonishment did little to calm Pumyra's abraded nerves.

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T Minus Five Hours

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"It was like that, huh?"

"Yes," Maria replied, grasping Laheela's hand even tighter. "I did not love Ramon, yet my father would have had me marry him."

"Arranged marriage isn't just a Thunderian thing. How about that?" Maria clearly heard the ironic humor in Laheela's words.

"So long as I gave them a grandchild, they would have all been happy. Everyone would have what they wanted so long as I was obedient. Before all this, I would have done it."

"Sounds like you would have been miserable."

"I would have loved my child, don't get that wrong, I would have loved the baby with every fiber of my heart. But..."

"You would never have loved this Ramon."

"No." Thoughts of the life that had once seemed to be her destiny played like a hackneyed drama behind her eyes, the heroine who was forever denied what she truly wanted in favor of what was expected and demanded of her. From the perspective she'd gained so recently, the whole affair seemed so absurd to her.

"I'm sure you and Lisker could..."

"No. We cannot." A strangled sigh fought its way through her constricting throat. Denied her heart, or denied a baby inside her. So close to being able to have the man she loved so much she felt she were killing herself a kiss at a time, she had to face the fact that while her womanhood would accept his love, it would never take his seed. "Humans and Wollos... cannot give eachother young..."

"Does Lisker know that?"

"Yes. I told him the first night we were together."

"He doesn't mind?"

"I've told him all of this, and he told me the choice was mine to make." Not in so many words, though. "I've made it. What about you?"

"Me?" Laheela asked, stunned.

"Have you ever loved someone?"

"Not the way you and he do, if that's what you mean." Maria took some satisfaction that Laheela finally came to some realization that Lisker wasn't the bastard the other woman had painted him to be in her mind.

"I hope you do one day."

"So do I."

Conversation came to an abrupt halt as the doorway opened and a tense Lisker entered. Laheela took in his tight eyes and set jaw and knew that it was time to get things moving. Her heart began to race, butterflies making her stomach a home now that zero hour had been reached.

"Now?" Maria asked, trepidation shaking her voice.

"Now," he replied, motioning the Wollo closer. Maria rose from the bench and approached with anxiety lurking beneath the confident steps. "You have everything?"

"Of course." Maria patted the side of her jacket in emphasis. "Go ahead."

He really hates doing this, Laheela realized as Lisker placed the shackles on Maria's slightly trembling wrists. Maybe he's not so bad. I still can't bring myself to trust him like she does, but...

"They're too loose," she said, catching their attention. "If those aren't tight enough, the Mutants'll know it."

"I don't mind," Maria said, looking up at his tense features. Lisker nodded curtly before tightening the shackles with an audible click and a gasp from Maria.

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice as tight as his body. "I'll have to treat you like an object out there. I have to fool them one more time."

"I know. Do what you must, Lisker." He bent down, kissing her gently and Maria's manacled hands clasped his face and drew him into her. They parted and the emotion Laheela saw in Lisker's eyes was unmistakeable.

"You've done so much for me, Maria," he said. "You have no idea how much. Thank you."

"You've done more than you know for me, too, and once this is over, we can..."

"I love you."

"And I you. Let's get going," Maria replied, casting a look over her shoulder at Laheela. "Good luck to you, my friend."

"You, too, Maria." They left, two unlikely lovers, and as the door sealed shut once again Laheela felt a surge of envy for the Wollo. Whether or not Lisker was genuine, and it sure as hell seemed so, she at least had the illusion of love to carry her.

When did I start thinking love is an illusion?

When her world had been destroyed by two Kaldian slave dealers and the monkey bastard who'd bought her from them. When every aspect of her life had been defined by another and she'd been forced to become a breathing puppet for his twisted desires.

The puppetmaster was gone. Her strings were now cut, her will entirely her own once more. Laheela realized with some surprise that she was already free inside. She no longer had to be excruciatingly careful of her facial expression, no longer had to force her will into the back of her mind. No more would she have to lock away her dignity and self-worth to survive another day of torment and rape. The notion finally became real to her in those moments after Lisker led his lover to the holds to play out her role in this game of deception he was playing on Grune.

No. It was no game. Not to her, not to the others, and most surprising of all not to Lisker.

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T Minus Three Hours

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The transfer had gone more smoothly than Lisker could have hoped. Each slave had been chained hand and foot and escorted into the holding areas to await the ThunderCats' joining them.

From the corner of his eye, Lisker saw them shove Maria through the door to the holding cell. He restrained himself with a herculean effort, willing his face into a stony mask as she was shoved into the dingy space.

Hold on, he thought, be strong, Maria.

"That's the last of them," a Scavenger said as the thick door slid closed. The plan had still not been uncovered, he thought in consolation. Maria would not be bound long. Secretly, he sought out Guyver One and found him easily close enough. The time was nearly at hand. Lisker walked away from the holding area, confident in the fortitude of his Wollo lover. Maria would not fail.

Maria tested the short length of chain which bound her wrists, thinking of Lisker as she sat sandwiched between an abused Thunderian and another Wollo. The keys felt as though they would burn straight through the material of her jacket, absorbing her desire to free herself and the others in this shadowed and poorly-ventilated hell. The reek of stale sweat and blood was soaked into every surface and it took all of her resolve not to gag at the miasma of odors. Maria breathed through her mouth, replaying memories of each time Lisker had made love to her in an attempt to quell the fear which was trying to bloom in her heart.

So far, everything was according to plan. So far...

Stop that! she commanded herself, drawing on the growing wellspring of inner resolve she had discovered since meeting Lisker. Maria forced her body to remain still, her breathing slow and even. The plan was in motion, and all she could do was wait for the signaller in her hidden pocket to activate in the silence which multiple sets of breathing lungs seemed to only emphasize.

Lisker returned to the chambers he had commandeered aboard the Ravager and felt no lingering desire to take one final look at it. Though he had met and loved Maria here, the space itself was just a series of rooms. He would not miss it even in the slightest, even though he had no clue where he and Maria could go on this weird Third Earth. He briefly wondered just how much truly had changed in the two millennia since his first defeat at the hands of Guyver One. Obviously there could be no more major cities. If this expanse was all that remained of Boston, he despaired the chances of New York or San Fransisco still being on the map.

"Is she safe?" Laheela asked, walking toward him and coming to a halt a half-dozen steps away.

"As safe as anyone can be in this place," Lisker replied. He wouldn't sugar-coat it. They both knew better than that. He checked the gold Rolex on his left wrist, which Mumm-Ra had recreated along with his suit, and nodded. "We leave in thirty minutes."

"How close are they?" she asked, her eyes still wary as they searched him for any sign of deception. Lisker did not let it bother him. He had never expected to win her over completely.

"Five miles," he said. "They've stopped, probably to regroup for the assault." He stared directly into her cat-like eyes, projecting his will as though it were a physical presence. "You have to convince them, Laheela. If the Mutants realize what's happening, or if enough get to the ships to use them..."

"You don't have to finish that, I know. I've been here a lot longer than you have."

"You've got a point. I know you don't much like me, Laheela, but I'm sorry you and your people wound up like this. Just so you know."

"Apologizing isn't necessary," she replied. "It's not your fault. At least you're doing something to change it." Her posture relaxed slightly, her features softening just a little. "That's more than anyone else has ever been able or cared enough to do."

"Cared enough?"

"There have been people, business associates of Primor's," she explained, "who saw themselves as good people just because they didn't own slaves. They did business with him because it was only about credits."

"Money talks and bullshit walks," Lisker said, recalling a much-used aphorism from the ancient past. Laheela barked a rueful laugh.

"Ain't it the truth. They saw themselves as if they held the moral high ground and, if that young woman kneeling in the corner was property it was a case of sucks-to-be-her. One hell of a double standard."

"Yeah." He'd seen quite a bit of that in his own life, even though he could not claim to be a paragon of high morality himself.

"I asked Maria this," Laheela began. Lisker could practically feel the searching aspect of her gaze. "Why are you doing this? Why do you care enough?"

"I'm sure she answered you..."

"I want to hear *your* answer," she replied, her tone sharp. "I've agreed to help, and I'm trusting you enough to do it even when every instinct is screaming at me to stop. You owe me at least that." Though it was far too late for her to back out now, Lisker knew he wouldn't force her to go along. He wasn't the man who had come into this place. Not anymore.

"I don't have a concrete answer for you," he replied, walking slowly over to the bench to sit upon the hard surface. "I wish I did, but I don't. I've changed since coming here."

"Since meeting Maria?"

"Yeah. Seeing all these people in conditions that at best could be called deplorable, it pisses me off. When those monkeys were about to rape Maria, it all came up in a rush. I think that's when I decided to set all this up, or at least when the idea took root.

"Laheela, I hate these Mutant people. I've seen enough to know what'll happen if they get their way on Third Earth. I can't let it keep on like this."

"You don't strike me as the heroic type." Laheela's eyes were uncertain, wary, her posture stiff once more.

"I'm not, and I don't claim to be. I've done a lot of bad things in my life, made more than my share of wrong choices. Maybe being revived on Third Earth is a chance to make some amends."

"So, what is it? Heroism? Love? Redemption? What's driving you to do this?"

"I told you I didn't have a concrete answer for you."

"You are so confusing," Laheela said with a slight snarl. The most frustrating part was that she knew he was not lying, not being evasive with half-answers. "Ever heard of something called simple right and wrong?"

"Sure have. Thing is, not everything's that simple."

"I know that." Damnit.

"Do you realize," Lisker said, his voice amiable, "that this is the longest conversation we've had since I brought you here?"

"It is," she replied. She had asked, and had come away unsatisfied. It was too much, she supposed, to expect Lisker to go from slave driver to super hero.

"Look, I never expected you to fully warm up to me. I didn't even ask that you come to like me. If you want to think I'm a total dickhead for the rest of your days, I'm fine with that. But keep in mind that you'll be thinking that as a free woman."

"How much longer?"

"How does ten seconds grab you?" Laheela turned to face him as he rose from the bench, his face determined and hard. "I said this was the longest conversation we'd ever had."

"Then, let's have done with it." Lisker nodded once.

"Stand back." Laheela obliged, backing away to the door. What...

"Guyver!" The bench which had been her bed was pulverized instantly. Displaced air washed over her as a spherical barrier surrounded Lisker and his golden armor appeared. Each piece seemed to leap onto his body as though eager for the coming battle, coils of black bio-mass writing in the open spaces where armor plate did not cover. At the end of it, he stood in a sizeable depression in the floor and was easily two heads taller than before, and quite a bit larger all in all. Having never witnessed his transformation before, Laheela's jaw dropped open at the sight. The dent in the floor in which he stood was perfectly hemispherical, as though the floor panels had been reduced to their component atoms with the surge of energy released.

"Wow," was all she said, quite impressed.

"There's an airlock just two decks up from here. We'll sneak out that way."

"And, if any Mutants see us along the way?" she asked, knowing the answer but wanting his reaction.

"We'll be the last thing they see."

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T Minus Two Hours, Thirty Minutes

==========

Lion-O willed himself not to pace beneath the pale moonlight, busying himself with final preparations before the strike. Gomplins were still coming to a landing at the forest's edge, weapons being checked and re-checked beneath Turmagar's watchful eye as his warriors performed checks on their rifles. His nerves sang like high-tension wires exposed to high winds with the thought that, five miles away and under Mutant guard, so many other Thunderians awaited rescue. He reviewed the plan once more as they all awaited Cheetara's return from her mission of scouting out this Fortress Plun-Darr and determining Mutant readiness.

A mission he had sent her on. Despite having promised not to treat her as someone fragile and delicate, he had nearly sent Tyrga instead. His invisibility, though useful, was trumped by the necessity of getting this intelligence as soon as possible. Cheetara was the right choice, the only choice. Five miles was practically five paces with her speed, and he knew she would not take unnecessary risks. He told himself to relax for what felt like the millionth time in the past half-hour.

Laheela revelled in the feel of the night air rushing against her exposed skin as she grasped Lisker's armored form. They moved entirely unsupported through the night, silent and unseen, the shadows of the trees below denying the moon's light much access. She would have to find her way through who-knew-what down there, but at the end of the trail she would find them. Without warning, their path through the sky became perpendicular to the ground rather than paralell and Laheela's stomach lurched violently.

Cool, dew-soaked grass greeted her bare feet with the smells of the forest teasing her nose as Lisker released her. Knowing that it was useless, she looked about her new surroundings anyway. It was the first non-Mutant inhabited scenery she had witnessed in a long while. Invigorating!

"Two miles in that direction," Lisker's distorted voice said from the shadowed form beside her. In what lunar light managed to pierce the thinning forest canopy, she was able to make out tree trunks and some scrub bushes along the way. "The ThunderCats are waiting. This is as close as I can take you."

"It's enough."

"Good luck." Laheela took a few steps before feeling compelled to stop.

"Lisker?"

"Yeah?"

She froze, uncertain of just what she wanted to say to him, if she should say anything. "You were being honest, after all."

"About time you clued in on that."

"Thank you," she said before her throat could close again, "for caring enough."

"Sure."

Lisker tracked her progress easily, the darkness doing nothing to limit his vision. The way she was moving, he knew, she'd reach them in minutes. Two miles wasn't all that far, after all.

Activating the gravity controller, Lisker rose silently and streaked back to Fortress Plun-Darr as fast as the Guyver could carry him. Unseen by the Mutants or Grune, who was presently bellowing at them for not moving fast enough, Lisker took up a position atop the unfinished fortress and crouched to reduce his outline in the pale light. He watched them work, for once not having access to slaves to handle the drudgery, and flexed his grip on the girder beneath his feet.

What to use first? he thought, fixing on a monkey fiddling with a fixed cannon. Who to use it on? Lisker spotted Grune, and considered. In the end, it did not matter. All of them were catching the last train west tonight, there was no point in beginning with any one douchebag in particular.

The sensor medals, on his command, locked onto the Ravager and peered inside. So many biometric readings in the holds, the ones outside them conforming to Mutants, he had difficulty locking onto Maria.

There she is. Lisker fixed on her reading and saw that she was holding together. He returned his perceptions to normal and, to his surprise, found a bright glow of life energy skulking about the periphery of the grounds.

Cheetara.

It made sense that they'd send a spy to scope things out. Good.

Laheela slowed at the sound of voices just past the treeline. Many voices. She crept closer, heart thundering and blood surging at the thought of who was on the other side of those thick trunks. She peered out from behind one, seeing in the moonlight the ThunderCats, Thundera's nobility, and hope exploded inside when it all happened at once.

One, an aged Lynx, pointed directly at the tree behind which she crouched just before an iron grip wrenched her right arm behind her and what felt like a hand clamped tight over her mouth. Her first thought was that a Mutant had managed to track her, just before she could reach help, and hope mutated into desperate rage as she fought with every ounce of horror and anger she could muster.

"It seems we have a spy," a disembodied voice said and, through the crashing waves of despair the words rang a chord within her mind.

"NMMM!" she cried, shaking her head as her captor started dragging her... toward the ThunderCats?! What in the...

Tygra, positioned just outside the perimeter in case Mutant scouts happened to get lucky, had spotted the shadowed form charging the staging area and knew it couldn't have been Cheetara. The scout struggled in his grasp, howling into his hand, and Tygra realized something was amiss when the spy twisted about and what was obviously a breast pressed against his elbow. Mutants didn't allow females to serve on their ships in any capacity aside from a sexual one, so why...

"Tygra," Panthro said, "what is it?"

He caught her scent, and realized his mistake. Tygra released the Thunderian woman at once.

"I'm sorry about that," he said, genuinely embarrassed. "I thought you were a Mutant spy." Taking her by the arm, he guided her to the waiting ThunderCats.

Lion-O stared expectantly at the spot Lynx-O indicated just before the sounds of a scuffle came and went. Two forms emerged from the shadows and into the pale light.

"Jaga's cape," Bengali gasped as Tygra escorted a shivering Thunderian into the grasslands beyond the wood.

"ThunderCats!" she exclaimed, hope and relief both clear in her voice. "Stars above, he was telling the truth!"

"Who was?" Pumyra asked as the two drew nearer. Lion-O glanced at her garb, what little there was of it, and anger began to melt away the nervous tension.

"My name is..."

"Laheela?!" Myrlha cried out, charging over to the other woman and clasping hands with her. "Is that you?"

"It's me," Laheela replied warmly. "I'm so glad to see you again, Myrlha."

"I promised to come back with help, didn't I?"

"Please, ThunderCats," Laheela pleaded, "there is no time. You must listen to me! Please!"

"We will," Lion-O said gently. "How did you escape?"

"I didn't. I was set free."

"By who?" Panthro asked.

"Lisker." A collective gasp of shock was followed by confused murmurs at her pronouncement.

"Maybe you should start from the beginning," Tygra advised, moving to stand with the others.

"All of the slaves," Laheela began, "our countrymen, the Wollos, and those brute people, they are all on the Mutant flagship."

"The Ravager," Myrlha provided.

"Yes. Lisker convinced Grune to let him transfer all of them there."

"Why?" Lynx-O asked.

"Lisker is not on Grune's side. Listen..."

"Are you alright, Maria?" She tensed at the soft voice of Ramon, chained to her immediate right. His dark wool clothing was tattered and torn, exposing a body she had cried herself to sleep over the thought of making love to. He was handsome, true, tight-muscled and lean for a Wollo, but he was not Lisker. Nowhere close.

"Yes," she answered, her voice tight. Ramon was nice enough, but she did not love him. After meeting Lisker, she could never love Ramon the way he wanted. She could never love him anyway.

"I am so glad," he said, the honey in his words genuine. This did not dissuade her, not in the slightest. "I love..."

"Shut up," she said, intentionally making her words harsh. "I do not love you, and I never will."

"Wh-what?!" the hurt in his voice was matched by the shock on his face.

"I know," she began, this time more gently, "that my father was arranging for us to be wed, but I do not wish that for myself."

"The arrangement is made," he replied, gathering his indignation. "Were it not for us being here, we would have..."

"I know. Ramon, I do not want to hurt you, but I cannot be with you."

"Don't tell me..." he trailed off, abject horror clear in the shaking finger which pointed at her jacket. "You... and... that human?!"

"Yes," she replied simply, "and his name is Lisker."

"Stupid woman," Ramon snarled, and Maria felt her own anger rise in response. "How could you confuse rape for love?!"

"Quiet!" hissed the Thunderian to her left. "You want them to come in here?"

"Listen to me, Ramon, because I will only explain this once. Lisker has done nothing to me, but he has done much for me. I have given myself to him, completely and freely. I love him, not you, and he loves me too."

"Idiot," Ramon said, his low voice dripping with venom. "I could give you whatever you want."

"No, you would give me everything but what I need."

"I could give you a child," Ramon said smugly. Were it not for the chains she wore, Maria would have slapped him for sinking so low. "*That*, he can never give you." Maria looked at him, clearly seeing him for the first time, and could feel nothing but disgust at him, at the archaic custom of arranging marriages. In pointing out the one thing Lisker could never do for her, and in such a spiteful manner, Ramon showed her exactly what her marriage to him would have been. A sham, nothing more. She would have been a mere symbol, a way of joining two families which had comfortable holdings.

"You could," she growled, "but so could any male Wollo. Don't act as though that fact makes you special." Maria, fuming with anger that bordered on rage, set her jaw tight and her gaze firmly forward.

"At least I *am* a Wollo." Maria pretended not to hear him. If she acknoweledged him now, she would not be able to prevent herself from trying to beat him into a pulp. So much noise would bring the Mutants guarding them in, and if they found the keys she had hidden on her, Lisker's planning would become all for nothing.

Hurry, she thought though she knew Lisker could not hear it.

Cheetara crouched low behind a boulder which pointed to the stars like a jagged finger, immersing herself in the shadows which the artificial lights mounted on poles that dotted the grounds had not managed to banish. Her speed was her best ally on intelligence missions, and one she had counted on over and over again in her years as a ThunderCat.

"Can you believe this shit?" asked a Scavenger, a tawny jackal, to the reptillian who was helping him mount a fixed cannon onto its support platform. "The slaves oughtta be doing the hard work, not us!"

Yes, she thought, why *are* you doing real work when you've got so many enslaved?

"You heard Grune," the Reptillian said, "he doesssn't want the ssslaves near these weaponss!"

"Bullshit, Karg, total bullshit and you know it! It's that fucking Lisker's fault we're busting our asses out here in the middle of the fucking night!"

Lisker? Cheetara's eyes widened in surprise. What did Lisker have to do with the Mutants not forcing slaves to do the heavy work? More than a tad curious, Cheetara remained silent in waiting.

"Why doess he care about a bunch of sslavess?" the Reptillian, Karg, asked. "They're ssuppossed to be put to work! That'ss the whole damn point!"

Strange, she thought, sprinting lightly away from the griping Mutants. She had better things to do than listen to a discourse on the points and pros of enslaving others. Cheetara kept to the shadows, dashing from one well of concealment to another around stacks of stone blocks and crates of weapons to the long rectangles of the slave pens roughly in the center of the morass of supplies and contstruction materials. She stopped behind a pile of thick gray slabs, her staff extending to lift her silently to the top. Moonlight washed over the stones, leaving her dangerously exposed until she dropped flat on her toned stomach to eliminate her profile. It was as close to the pens as she could possibly get, the area about them blazing with hazardous light.

No guards, she noticed at once. The Mutants would never make the mistake of leaving their slave pens unguarded. Cheetara focused her sixth sense as well as she was able, reaching out with her mind to the long metal structures. Though limited, the sense confirmed what she had inferred from eavesdropping on the two earlier and the sight of Mutants actually working. The slaves weren't in the pens. They weren't on the construction site. They were either inside Fortress Plun-Darr itself, or on the Mutant ships.

They know we're coming, Cheetara thought, as she crawled slowly back to the shadowed edge behind her. They don't know we're already here. Surprise is still on our side. Also, they would not have to worry about their countrymen or the Wollos getting caught in a crossfire. Still, what did Lisker have to do with that, and how did Grune find out that...

Lisker, she realized. He somehow got the information from Sho's mind. Even so, something did not sight right with her. They were acting as if they had plenty of time to prepare, not that the attack could come at any moment. Had Lisker given them false information?

Using her staff, Cheetara gently lowered herself back into the shadows and retraced her route to make her exit. One had to know, after all, when one's luck had been pressed enough.

"So," Lion-O said, "are we talking about the same Lisker?" Her tale so far did not add up to the Lisker he had formed in his mind.

"I know this is hard to believe," Laheela said, breathless, "but I swear it is true. He killed the Mutants who were about to torture me for the codes to lock the Starsweeper, Pillage, and Bludgeon's main computers to the Ravager's."

"How does he know we're here?" Lion-O asked.

"Beg pardon, but he was tracking that one," Laheela replied, pointing at Sho. "He claims to..."

"Son of a BITCH!" Sho shouted, crouching down and holding his head in his hands. "I should've known! Damnit!"

"Sho?"

"I focused so hard on keeping him outta my head that..."

"He was more easily able to trace your position," Lynx-O added. "Most unfortunate."

"Unfortunate's not the word I'd use. DAMNIT!"

"What's this?" Cheetara asked on sprinting into the group and sighting the battered form of Laheela addressing the ThunderCats. Brief explanations followed, eliciting a frown from her. "Strange, this does seem to correlate with what I saw at the grounds of Plun-Darr."

"What did you see?" Lion-O asked, confused. Of all the things that could pop up at the last minute...

"The Mutants are expecting us, but not for a while yet. Also, they're setting up defenses themselves, rather than having their slaves do the dirty work. They're not happy about that, either."

"So," Panthro said, "Laheela, you say all the slaves are aboard the Ravager?"

"Yes. Sir Panthro," she replied breathlessly. "Please, some of your forces must be sent there so all of them can escape!"

"I can confirm what she's saying," Sho added, his face twisted in anger. "I'll have to contact Lisker, but..."

"Do it," Lion-O ordered. "If Lisker knows we're here, then there's not much more that can go wrong."

"On it."

Sho closed his eyes, focusing his thoughts on the point of mental activity which had to be Guyver Two, locking in with all his available power.

(LISKER!!)

(You trying to blow my brains out?) Lisker's mental voice answered.

(What's the meaning of this?! What the hell are you planning?)

(Take a look,) he replied. (You can do that, can't you? None of us have time for a debate, so just look at my memories and see the truth for youself.)

(Fine.) Sho focused on the link between them, delving into the miasma of mental images from Lisker's memories. He ignored everything up until...

(You truly are a good man, Oswald Lisker.)

Images of Maria danced across his mind's eye, the love Lisker felt for her for a time becoming his own as more memories flashed across his perceptions. Weapons being left for Maria and the slaves to find, hatred for Grune, Laheela being rescued...

(Gotten enough of a look, Sho?)

(You're serious, aren't you?)

(As a heart attack, kid.)

(Why...)

(Shut up. We don't have time for this. You know the score, tell the others. Time matters, and we don't have much.)

(How do I know this isn't a trap?)

(For God's sake, Sho, you just looked at my fucking memories. How much more proof do you need?!)

(Fine. But, if you so much as think about hurting Cheetara...)

(You'll know. Fine. Whatever. Just get your ass in gear!)

Sho broke his connection with Lisker.

"Well?" Lion-O asked impatiently once Sho's eyes opened once again.

"He's on the level with this," the human replied, clearly puzzled. "I don't really understand why, but he's on our side this time."

"You're sure?"

"It's kinda tough to lie to someone who can search your memories like a file folder. It's just like Laheela said."

Lion-O remained silent, turning the newest development over and over and not really liking it. Lisker was an enemy, one with a personal axe to grind with two of his own fighters. Though he

hated to think it, Laheela may have been fooled into bringing them this information as a means to lure them into a trap.

For a moment, Lion-O found himself frozen in indecision.

"Cheetara," he began, "tell us all what you saw."

"Like I said before," she said, "the Mutants are expecting us, but not for a few more days at least. Also, they're mounting defenses themselves instead of forcing their slaves to do it. That in and of itself is rather odd."

"That isn't because of Grune," Panthro added. "He wouldn't care one way or the other if our people were in chains."

"From what I saw, Lisker didn't like them being enslaved one bit," Sho offered.

"Sho, how well do you know Lisker?"

"I only met him once before his control medal brought him back, and that was when I first butted heads with him. I don't know him well, but his memories were genuine. If those were false images I saw, I'd know."

"Cheetara, do you know where the others are?"

"All I know is that they're not in the slave pens or near the defensive preparations," she replied. "Either in Fortress Plun-Darr itself, incomplete as it is, or as Laheela said they're aboard the Ravager."

"That is where they are, my king," Laheela said, her voice pleading.

"And he brought you here to tell us," Sho said. "Once you hit that signaller you have palmed, he'll start smacking the Mutant Army around."

"Yes." Laheela held the small device aloft for everyone to see. "Lisker has the second, and Maria the third. She will begin freeing the rest once she gets the signal, and the Ravager should be under our control by the time we get there."

Not what I expected, Lion-O thought, not at all.

So, what to do?

He had only one option.

"Turmagar, how soon can your forces be ready?"

"Final preparations are alrady complete," the Tuska commander said. "We can charge within the hour."

"Laheela. You will take Myrlha and Tygra with you to secure the Ravager."

"Yes!"

"Maybe I oughtta do that," Panthro protested.

"No. Mutant control setups aren't known for being real sophisticated. Besides, Grune's no idiot. He'll pay attention to who's with the main assault party. If he doesn't see you, Panthro, he might suspect something's up."

"And, if Grune does not see me," Tygra added, "he'll just assume I've become invisible."

"How far away are the Mutant ships, Cheetara?"

"A mile or two west of Fortress Plun-Darr. Maybe fifteen minutes from here."

It was a gamble, Lion-O realized, but one he had been forced to take.

"The rest of us will proceed as planned. Right now, our objective is to keep the Mutant Army busy until the ships can be secured. Sho, transform and link up with the bombers. You know what to do from there."

"You know it," Sho said, turning to follow Turmagar to the Gomplin staging area. Farther back from where the ThunderCats had landed, the beasts and warriors had gathered in anticiaption.

"My fellow warriors," Turmagar began, drawing the attention of the other Tuskas, "one of our finest hours has begun." Sho remained still and silent at the Tuska commander went on.

"Due to unforseen circumstances, our part in this battle to free the countrymen of the ThunderCats is to happen far sooner. I expect weapons and manpower to be ready in one hour!"

"YES, SIR!" the Tuska warriors shouted in unison.

It should have been the worst hour of what Sho could recall of his life, yet it seemed familiar to the point of being pedantic and slightly irritating. He found himself to be pacing relentlessly, awaiting something which he knew must occur and yet found that he could scarcely wait for. It was the event, he realized, not the waiting he was so anxious for. The coming of the final truth, the reason for his existence and, Sho suspected, perhaps a great deal more.

If nothing else, he mused, the Mutants were going to have one hell of a bad night.

Back and forth he paced, until Turmagar tapped him politely on the shoulder.

"It's time," the walrus-like commander said.

"I understand." Sho departed for the clearest stretch of land he could find. "GUYVER!!!" Power rushed along his nerves as the barrier feild smashed the night air, the bio-booster armor appearing into reality and merging with him to leave him fully transformed with tiny wisps of steam rolling off of him into the dark. He took in Turmagar's wide-eyed stare and gave a short nod before activating the gravity controller and shooting straight into the inky darkness. He hovered motionless as the whines of small turbine engines reached him. One by one, the Gomplins rose upward in a circle of beast and machine, their clawed feet and hands carrying miniature explosives. Restless, he looked down to see the bright lifeglow of Tygra, Myrlha, and Laheela racing toward the Mutant ships. The attack had to begin before they could arrive at their destination. At last, the ThunderStrike rose to join the air forces and, without a command, all moved forward.

Drop yer cocks and grab yer socks, Mutants, Sho thought as he recalled an ancient slogan from air forces around Second Earth. Time to feel some hurt!

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The sudden buzzing against her left chest, though she had been waiting breathlessly for it, still shocked Maria once it began. After stifiling a gasp, she raised a manacled hand to the secret pocket she had sewn in her jacket and pulled out the vibrating signaller. Her muscles tensed as she kissed it, knowing that all the chips were now on the table. Time to do her part.

Breathless with nerves positively *singing*, Maria reached once more into her pocket while ignoring the whispered question of the Thunderian sitting next to her. She produced a single key, which she used to free her wrists and ankles.

"Listen to me," she said to him, as she gave him the key, "there is a way out for us. The ThunderCats are attacking the Mutants right now. We must get this ship ready."

"What?" the old one, whose name she recalled to be Siberias, asked in stunned surprise.

"Trust me. A plan has been laid out. I ask you to trust me. We *must* get this ship under out control. Pass the word along."

"I shall," he said, accepting the key. Maria wasted no time, selecting another Thunderian to give a key and whisper for her to begin freeing others. Lisker had told her not to give the key to one of her own. The Thunderians had been slaves for far longer, and would be even more determined to rally than the enslaved Wollos. Maria placed complete trust in him, and it was far too late to back down now.

With the third key in hand, she rushed along the rows of manacled people to a gathering of five who had no bench space free. Panting, she pulled free the third key and unlocked their chains before asking them to vacate the floor panel on which they sat.

"What is this?" the lionesque male, whose name she recalled was Torr added as he stood unfettered beside his wife. Maria crouched, snatching desperately at the grated floorplates in an attempt to pry them up.

"Freedom," she replied, muscles straining.

"Let me, then," Torr said as he grasped the floor panel and added his strength to her own. The metal plate popped open, and Maria did not hesitate to slide it aside in order to expose the weapons beneath. Torr reached in and hefted one experimentally.

"How did these get here?" he whispered, astonished that such things had been under more than his nose.

"This has been Lisker's plan from the beginning," Maria explained as more curious slaves neared and gasped at the small arrangement of weapons exposed beneath the floor. "He gave me the keys to our chains, and stashed weapons for us to use. We have to get this ship completely under control before the ThunderCats arrive."

"The Nobility comes?" asked a female to her right.

"Calm down, calm down," Torr said quietly. "Let this Wollo speak."

"I know these weapons are few," Maria went on, "but Lisker has hidden more in the other holding areas. Unfortunately, he was unable to steal as many as he wanted. That's why he gave me this." The collective gasps and murmurs of surprise created a hum in the air as she held aloft the master card key. By then, nearly all of the collective Thunderians, Wollos, and Brute Men had been freed for a total of nearly forty people. Of that number, though, she was uncertain how many could fight. Maria could only hope it would be enough.

Torr glanced at his mate, the woman who made him whole, and Kyranna nodded. For him, for the cubs he wanted to have with her, it was impetus enough. Grasping the energy rifle he'd pulled from the secret compartment, he stood atop a recently vacated bench and raised the weapon above his head.

Time to man up, he thought.

"Brothers. Sisters. Everyone, Listen, please." Heads turned to him, Thunderian and Wollo alike as more shackles clattered softly to the floor. Torr took as deep a breath as his anxious nerves would let him, also checking that his line of fire to the sealed doorway was unobstructed. Standing atop the sitting space ensured that it was clear. He'd need that.

"Now is our time," he began, his voice gaining strength as adrenaline surged into his blood and purpose swelled his breast. He let his voice gain volume as well, he wanted everyone, particularly the Mutants he knew to be stationed on the opposite side of that door. "We have worn chains long enough! No more will our backs feel the bite of Mutant whips! No more will they beat us! No more will they torture us for their sick amusement! No more will they drag us to

their beds as slabs of meat for their pleasure!" Eyes were hardening, fires long thought by their captors to be extinguished flickering to life in some, flaring into roaring existence in others.

"The ThunderCats and their allies come to free us from our bondage, but they need our help to carry the day!" Never an orator before, Torr did not allow himself to be surprised at the sudden ease the role came to him. "My countrymen, my friends, rally! For years, as our people were sold, as they died, our mantra was 'One Day'. I tell you, that day is now! Our days of bowing and scraping..."

"CAN IT IN THERE!!"

"... are over!" Torr continued, ignoring the bellowed command. The gathered Thunderians began to bare their teeth as each and every moment of pain and degradation flashed in their minds, and the thought of making the Mutants pay for them all.

"LISKER OR NO LISKER, WE'LL BEAT THE SHIT OUTTA EACH ONE OF YOU!" the Simian guard roared. "SHUT THE FUCK UP!!"

"Through all of this, we have not abandoned hope! Now, we are rewarded! Tonight, my countrymen, WE FIGHT! WE WILL FIGHT, AND WE SHALL WIN!" Torr stood gasping at the end of his impromptu speech as cheers and roars of rage at the Mutants buffeted him. The intense reaction, and his strange place as instigator of this rebellion, nearly caused him to miss the sound of the door sliding open. Torr shouldered the ion rifle and took careful aim as the first barricade to be overcome revealed one of the guards in a square of sickly yellow light. The Simian stepped in, for a second unaware that none of the slaves were wearing their chains. It was the last second he would waste.

"FOR OUR PEOPLE!!" Torr screamed from the pit of his stomach as he squeezed the trigger. The pale green bolt of energized ions leapt from the rifle, the guard's head evaporating into a crimson mist. Torr took aim once more when the second guard's shadow appeared in the square of light. Hesitating not for a second, Torr fired another bolt which burned through the second Mutant's head and collapsed him onto the cold metal floor. Two headshots, not too shabby. The skills his mother had taught him for hunting had not faded as much as he'd feared.

"So, what next?" asked Selwyn, the architect among them. Torr froze for a moment, that one question lancing the heat of elation with a cold splash of reaity. Every eye was looking to him for guidance, and the young Lion nearly choked.

"Do you know where the weapons are in the other holding cells?" he asked the Wollo.

"Yes."

"Right. Those of us who are most able-bodied, take what weapons are here. We'll make for where the others are held and arm ourselves further. The more we free, the more difficult it will be for the Mutants to stop us."

"We must move now!" roared a voice from the throng.

"Then, let's move!" Torr shouted. "We are slaves no longer!" He stepped down from his improptu soapbox and into the arms of Kyranna, who wasted no time in kissing him passionately.

"I knew there was a reason I married you," she said with a mischevious wink before becoming serious. "Be careful. Please, Torr, I can't lose you."

"You won't," he said with more confidence than he felt.

==========

Good job, Laheela, Lisker thought when the signaller began to buzz. He looked toward where the ThunderCats had made base camp and noticed several heat signatures approaching, several things he'd never seen before, a machine which split into three parts, and Sho. They'd brought an air force? Lisker shook his head in amusement. Those ThunderCats, it seemed, didn't do things piecemeal.

Each time he'd bio-boosted since his last confrontation with Sho, strange dreams would follow which showed him several interesting things the armor could do. The head beam and flying it had shown him immediately once he'd witnessed the other Guyver perform them.

He glanced down in time to see several Mutants gazing about at the approaching noise, and he floated easily away from his perch. From Grune's increasingly alarmed shouts, the bastard had put two and two together faster than the Mutants, but it would do him no good. This part of the plan was successful. The Thunderian stood well away from the functional cannons situated about the perimeter, which was too bad, but Lisker wanted the Mutants unable to mount any effective ranged assault against the coming forces. As the enraged Grune screamed Lisker's name followed by a string of epithets and hollow vows of retribution, he commanded the gravity controller to summon the sphere of the pressure cannon.

"DAMN YOU, LISKER!" Grune screamed as the approaching sounds of aerial vehicles neared and the true traitor was finally revealed. That triple-damned human had hidden behind Chilla's obvious scheming nature and his own indifference and had lied outright about the ThunderCats only getting underway!

"Form a defensive perimeter!" he bellowed, an act which came easily to him, and pointed to the nearest group of dumbfounded Mutants. "They're here already! Fight, damn your hides, FIGHT! Get those cannons..."

Grune was cut off by a set of three hammering explosions and his jaw went slack at the sight of four functiounal cannons erupting into balls of flame. Scattered dismembered Mutant limbs flew helter-skelter from the blast zone. The light of the blazing wreckage lent a hellish tint to the steady artificial lighting which came from halogen bulb racks atop thin metal poles.

Grune roared his rage as the sounds of aircraft passed overhead, yet his blood ran cold at the sight of a blue-armored figure landing squarely in the middle of the panicking Mutants. Guyver One wasted no time in extending the blades on his arms and began laying waste to Mutant soldiers with abandon.

Grune retreated away from the site of battle. Best to rally his troops in areas not yet affected by the surprise attack.

Sho ceased all concentration on the gravity controller and landed in a crouch amid dozens of stupefied Mutants. He sprang forward, commanding the sonic swords to engage and slashed a monkey-like Mutant in two from shoulder to hip before giving the same to a jackal-type. Mutant after Mutant fell to his blades as the three parts of the ThunderStrike led the Gomplins to the stretch of land on which the Nosedivers and Skycutters had been arranged until suitable storage facilities could be built. Without those, the Mutant's combat capabilities would be far more manageable. In the meantime, he had to soften up the footsoldiers as much as he could until Lion-O arrived with the main ground assault.

He caught a glimpse of Lisker's armored form landing amid a clump of Mutants several feet away and tensed even more. Even if he was an ally, Lisker was no friend. Even so, it seemed that Guyver Two was keeping up his part of this assault...

(Remember, kid,) his voice said over their telepathic link, (in combat, the only sin is hesitation.)

(Less thought, more fight!) Sho replied, grasping the heads of two Jackals and smashing them together with enough force to reduce their craniums to tomato sauce. (I've got my eye on you.)

(Yeah, yeah, whatever. Worry less about your precious Cheetara and more about kicking Mutant ass!)

(...)

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Mutant guards had been surprisingly light, Maria was pleased to discover as she kept pace behind the twelve armed Thunderians. Any they had discovered had been cut down by beams from the rifles Lisker had stashed in their holding cell on sight, and none had come at them from behind or the side corridors. Before this place, before Lisker, Maria would have balked at such killing. Now, however, she knew that their captors had to perish. It was the only way to ensure freedom for those enslaved here.

She carried no weapon, trusting the armed men and women to keep her safe as they navigated the twisting corridors of the Ravager's lower decks. Behind their rag-tag group were five armed Thunderians covering their backs as the group charged along one corridor after another until finding themselves before a massively thick door guarded by three Mutants.

It was no contest.

Maria ignored the stink of bunt Mutant flesh as she raised the master keycard to the reader panel situated on the right side of the doorway. The two halves of the metal door slid laboriously open to reveal even more chained Thunderians, Wollos, and Brute Men sitting on hard benches looking up in alarm.

"Countrymen!" Torr shouted as the three who had been entrusted with shackle keys raced among the bound ones and Maria shot to the spot where more weapons were hidden. "Our enslavement is over! The Nobility is on this world, and now they fight for our lives! We must help them!" Dozens of sets of eyes regarded him in pure bewilderment, the rifle in his hands drawing the most stares before three of the unarmed Thunderians darted in amongst them bearing keys with Maria leading one to the very center.

"Is this true?" asked a Cheetah female, her naturally lean body showing scars from whips.

"Torr is telling the truth," Kyranna said, unlocking her chains and offering the other a look of determination. "The ThunderCats are fighting for us right now alongside their allies on this world. We have to get this ship under our control!"

"Then let's do this!" shouted a young Lynx boy. "I knew Myrlha would bring help!"

"Your name?" Torr asked, recognizing him as the one to find the fissure Myrlha and Salvador had to have used to escape.

"Lynxran," the kitten replied.

"That fissure you found worked, young man," Torr said with a wide grin. "Thank you."

"Give me a weapon, Torr," Lynxran said, his face and eyes resolute.

"No, you're too young."

"I can fight!" the Lynx shouted as Maria and two other Wollos pried open the floorplates to reveal more stashed weapons.

"I know you want to," Kyranna said, kneeling next to him, "but we need you to stay with those who can't fight. I know you're brave, but you must stay out of the action. There are other kittens on this ship. Please, take care of them," she finished, embracing the kitten. Torr suddenly recalled him more clearly, an orphan. Poor kit. "You're among the oldest of the kittens. Gather them to you, and keep them safe."

"I will," Lynxran said, clearly disappointed yet determined. "I won't let you down."

Torr took stock of the armed Thunderians holding position and watching for approaching Mutants as weapons were distributed among those able to fight. Maria appeared at his side with a hopeful smile and the master keycard still in hand.

Command decision time.

"Maria."

"Yes, Torr?"

"There are four more holding pens. Once we liberate them, I would like you to do something for us."

"What is it?" she asked.

"Once the rest are liberated, give the master keycard to me. I know where the armories are, and we can arm ourselves from there. I'll send some of us to lead the rest of your people, those unable to fight, and the Brute Men to the slave's mess. Go with them, and help keep them calm. The bridge will no doubt be more heavily guarded..."

At that moment, bolts of red energy began to lance down the corridor amid shouts of armed Thunderians hitting the deck and returning fire. Torr leapt into the fray in time to see four Mutants gunned down in spectacular fashion and immediately checked for any dead or wounded. A few Brute Men suffered minor flesh wounds, which the poor beastmen seemed to hardly notice.

Close, he thought, way too close.

"We are too close together," Siberias said, inspecting the minor injuries and nodding. "We cannot move as a single mass group."

"I should have thought of that," Torr said through gritted teeth.

"Why not send the rearward fighters to escort them to the slave's mess?" Selwyn asked. Enough of us are armed now."

"Right," Torr replied, asking that word be passed to their armed countrymen taking up the rear.

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"From the sound of things," Panthro said as the ThunderTank raced to the perimeter of Fortress Plun-Darr, "they're really tearing it up over there!" Lion-O drew the Sword of Omens, willing it to battle length and searching out targets as they raced closer. Cheetara manned the turret in the rear compartment, its three barrels primed and ready. With battle coming closer at nearly a mile a minute, he felt the familiar rush of adrenaline that tingled his nerves and heated his blood. This time, he vowed, the Mutant Army would be destroyed. His people would be freed from their chains, along with the innocent people of Third Earth who had been dragged into the thick of this mess.

If, that was, Lisker was true to his word.

They passed the hard-charging forces of Turmagar and his footsoldiers, who had marched ahead of the ThunderTank to ensure that both groups reached the battlefield as close to simultaneously as possible. Moments later, he saw that his trust in Sho; and his reluctant trust in Lisker, had paid off at the sight of several wrecked cannon emplacements and scattered Mutant remains amid the burning piles of scrap. The two Guyvers certainly hadn't wasted any time in dealing with the Mutants, or fighting each other. Simians and Scavengers were dashing about in complete disarray as the blue- and gold-armored warriors moved among them cutting down one enemy after another just as enormous balls of fire bloomed on the opposite side of the incomplete framework of Fortress Plun-Darr, tinting the immediate area of sky a deep and hellish red.

Cheetara set the rear turrets to auto, placing them under the control of the ThunderTank's targeting computers before leaping out to join Lion-O in the fray. She immediately charged into a group of Simians who were busy running for all they were worth from the carnage the two Guyvers were dishing out and knocked their legs out from beneath them before delivering lightning-quick jabs to their throats with the tip of her staff. A quick check showed Lion-O engaging two Scavengers, the Sword of Omens slashing true and removing their vacant heads with a single stroke.

So long as they could keep the Mutants off-balance, Tygra would have all the time he needed to reach the Ravager with Myrlha and Laheela. She knew that the sheer numbers of the Mutant Army were against them no matter how many individual footsoldiers they took down. This assault had to wrap up fast, or those selfsame numbers would eventually crush them. A battle of attrition was one they stood no chance of winning.

"Targets in sight," Lynx-O's voice said over the comm circuit. Bengali bared his teeth as the grouped Skycutters and Nosedivers appeared on the blasted plain beneath. His targeting systems already online, he and the pod which carried the woman he loved streaked downward. The second the targeting sight went red, Bengali hammered the firing button on the steering yoke as fast as he was able. The twin bolts of blue energy sent several Mutant vehicles up in balls of red-orange flame even as Mutants were hard-charging toward their mechanized mounts. As planned, the three sections of the ThunderStrike completed their strafing run just when the Gomplins flew overhead. Bengali watched as the beasts released the munitions as they dove and streaked above the assembled machines and the mini-bunker busters did their destructive work. Mutant and machine were both reduced to their component parts with each earth-shaking explosion as the three-acre motor pool was carpet bombed into scrap and carrion fodder.

"We didn't get them all," he snarled as blazing wreckage lightened the night with a false corona.

"Perhaps, but we have more than one pass," Lynx-O said in return. "Another pass should be sufficient."

For Pumyra, each explosion was an assurance that the cub inside her would have a chance to grow up in a peaceful world. Each lance of energy fired from the pod she controlled carried the promise of a life free from the constant worry of Mutant raids and the rigors of war. She had no clue if this was true or merely something to tell herself in order to avoid paroxysms of terror at the thought of what an unlucky shot could mean to her and her child, and pushed that thought as

far from her mind as she could. Instead, she allowed herself to feel a vicious joy at seeing so many Mutant war machines going up in flames. So far, so good, she told herself.

Though she couldn't see the battle proper, Myrlha heard every explosion that split the night and saw in the distance the flaring lights of fireballs which consumed those who had once been her captors. She did not slow, keeping pace with Tygra and Laheela as they rushed toward the idle Mutant starships. She knew next to nothing about Lisker, and had no clue as to why he would go to such lengths to ensure the defeat of his supposed allies, but there was no time for further contemplation. The small pistol the Tuskas had provided her felt somewhat awkward against her hip, and the warrior's admonishments to be extremely careful with the projectile weapon remained firm in her mind, but a weapon was a weapon.

Fifteen shots, she repeated to herself, here's hoping I won't put one in my own damn foot.

Tygra, shy and non-violent by nature, still found himself wishing he were with the main assault party as though his presence might be a critical factor. As his feet slapped against the soil in rapid succession he reminded himself what was at stake in his mission and how crucial it was to the success of this battle.

Even so, he took a measure of joy at the false dawn which was the result of Mutant war machines being bombed out of existence.

The hulking figure of the Ravager drew closer, the port side of the immense green vessel lined and pitted with impacts from space-borne debris and battles fought. Aboard were his countrymen, and any Mutants who were left to guard...

"HOLD...."

The Simian who had emerged from around the ship's bow fell at the sharp crack of one of the weapons Turmagar had given Myrlha and Laheela, a neat hole in his bare chest and blood pouring from it. Another sharp report, another hole, and the Mutant fell to the dirt.

Tyrga looked behind to find Laheela holding the gun in a two-handed grip which the Tuskas had hastily shown them. Smoke wafted from the barrel which she held steady as a rock and there was a look of pure hate in the Tygress's eyes. Given what she had obviously been through, her outfit marked her a former concubine, Tygra found he honestly couldn't blame her the feeling.

"Nice shot," Myrlha said with a grin.

"I've waited so long for that."

"Let's hurry," Tygra said, snapping her gaze to him. "The others won't hold out forever!"

"The door should be open by now!" Laheela exclaimed. "They must not have control of the bridge yet!"

"Better be careful once we're inside, then!"

In The Next Episode:

The battle rages on as the forces of the ThunderCats war against the might of the Mutant Army. With their war machines reduced to hot slag, the Mutants begin to call upon their superior numbers to turn the tide. Tygra, Myrlha, and Laheela break into the Ravager to help the now-freed Thunderians in their fight to control the Mutant flagship. Can the uneasy alliance between Guyver One and Guyver Two help the main assault force hold the Mutant Army long enough for Lisker's plan to succeed, or will a battle of attrition spell the downfall of Third Earth's mightiest bastions of goodness? All this and more in The Fight For Their Freedom: Part Two, the next episode of One Last War To Fight.