ThunderCats

Bio-Booster Armor Guyver

One Last War to Fight

Episode Three: Recovery

By Knight Writer

Lion-O sat in the dimly lit infirmary, watching the fluids in bags hung on a single metal rack drip slowly into lines that ended at bandaged points on WilyKit and WilyKat's left and right arms. They had almost died today. Everyone had almost died today, to be honest. If Vultureman hadn't been killed before that button could be pressed...

He didn't want to think about it. He knew he shouldn't. It was over now.

But it still replayed itself in his mind like some horrid movie.

Lion-O glanced up at the bruises which covered Kat and Kit's arms and let the anger come. Anything was better than berating himself like this. The fury he had felt then, however, refused to surface. Only weariness remained.

"Jaga, I could sure use some advice right now."

Lion-O didn't stir when he heard the door slide open. He knew from the shape of the shilouette in the square of light who it was.

"Couldn't sleep either, Cheetara?"

"No," the cheetah replied softly as she came up beside him. She knelt down, her mane of blonde and black-spotted hair brushing against Lion-O's arm for a moment. "How are they?"

"Sleeping like newborn cubs."

"Right now, I envy that. I have first watch in the morning."

"You should get some sleep."

"How about you? The kids don't need you to keep watch over them all night."

"I know. I'm just thinking."

"What about?" Cheetara asked. Her hand came to rest on Lion-O's arm. He looked down at it for a moment, drew some comfort from the gesture.

"About today. I knew the Mutants had been too quiet."

"There was no way you could have known," she said. "We sent the kids there because we thought it would be good for them. They want to help out."

"I'm not really talking about that." Lion-O sighed deeply. He had to say this. "I almost got everyone killed today."

"What?"

"I didn't realize Vultureman had the detonator until it was too late. If he hadn't been killed, he could have blasted us all over the desert."

"Lion-O..."

"Sometimes, Cheetara," he said, looking into her beautiful eyes, "I wonder if I'm really fit to lead."

"Don't say that," she replied, squeezing his arm. "Don't even think it. You weren't annointed Lord of the ThunderCats for nothing."

"So I passed the trials," Lion-O said, his voice beginning to waver. "I out-muscled Panthro, beat you in an overland race, outsmarted the kids, saw through Tygra's illusions, and beat Mumm-Ra barehanded. But, that's not all there is to being a leader."

"Listen to me, Lion-O," she said. Her other hand rested against his cheek, her eyes staring directly into his own. "The Annointment Trials weren't just about your physical strength. They were to test your ability to make decisions, then make them work. They were about refusing to give up, no matter what the odds." Cheetara moved closer, almost touching his nose. "And you did all that. You ARE fit to lead

us, and I am proud to call you Lord of the ThunderCats."

"I... Thank you, Cheetara. Just... Thank you." She was so close, he realized. He could feel her warm, sweet breath on his face, her soft breasts on his arm. Her lips were so close to his...

What was he thinking?

She backed away with a throaty giggle and a warm smile.

"Good night, my lord," Cheetara said as she came to her feet. Lion-O watched spellbound as she turned to leave.

What's going on? he thought as the door closed behind her. I can't think about Cheetara like that!

Can I?

"I guess I SHOULD get some sleep," he muttered as he rose to leave.

Mumm-Ra had not returned to his sarcophagus since blasting out the Mutants earlier that night. Instead, he had stood at the edge of his foul cauldron and watched as jumbled images of Second Earth flashed by in disconnected shards of history.

Much of the Golden Age of Man - what the few Third Earth philosophers and scholars called Second Earth - had been lost to the sands of time. The things humans had done at the height of their civilization, their knowledge, their cities, all laid to waste.

What so irritated Mumm-Ra, though, was that most of this was lost to him as well. During that time, magic had been forgotten and the Black Pyramid had rested beneath the sands. He had slept, undisturbed by neither man nor the Ancient Spirits of Evil. Man had been plentiful, and had enough evil in his heart...

"WHASSSUP!" shouted the voice of a dark-skinned male in the cauldron's waters. He spoke into a

strange device, a red-and-white can in his other hand.

"Mortals..." Mumm-Ra groaned in exasperation. Another thing man had once had in abundance was stupidity.

"Perhaps I am not searching where I should," he muttered. He had not wakened until that horrific blast of psionic energy that heralded the beginning of the end for mankind's reign, and had spent the remaining years marshalling his power for his return as it had been ordained in the days of First Earth.

The cauldron seethed for a moment, bringing forth a strangely home-like stretch of desert. A massive dome of pure energy mushroomed upward from the sand, tendrils of enormous power crackling out across the clear blue of the sky. Several shapes, Second Earth flying machines, which had been approaching vanished into balls of orange flame and black smoke. The image changed again to entire cities overrun by howling, screeching demons of all descriptions as they ravaged the world in one fell swoop. Zoanoids, they had been called.

"The Guyver..." he saw the black-armored figure fighting them, slaughtering those Zoanoids wholesale as if they were merely weaklings.

The image changed again...

"What?" There were TWO of them? The one he beheld was enormous, fifteen feet tall if it was an inch. Twin pods rested on each massive shoulder, both with a downward-jutting blade. Aside from the size, it was very similar to the Guyver which had revealed itself outside the Black Pyramid earlier that day, save that the color was gold.

This unknown Guyver faced down a massive creature, surrounded with an aura of light so intense that anyone who looked could have been blinded. In its head was a crystal...

"Alkanphel." That had to be him. Mumm-Ra had never before seen the Zoalord, what his underlings, he remembered, called the First One, but even through the cauldron he could feel its power. The battle was over, the oblong jade crystal once in Alkanphel's head lying in a pool of burning blood on the dirt.

The image changed again to the peaks of the Korath Mountains before the cauldron went black.

Mumm-Ra stepped back from the water's edge. The jumble hadn't shown him as much as he would have liked, but it had shown him enough.

"Things are becoming interesting," he said as he absently patted Ma-Mutt atop the demon dog's hideous head. The power he had felt from Alkanphel, even though it was only an image from the past, was tremendous even by Mumm-Ra's standards. In person, it had to have been even greater!

But, he had been defeated by that gigantic Guyver.

Back in the times of the Pharoahs, certain writings had told of a wondrous armor of the gods that could bestow upon a man the power to rule for all time. Not much had been known, only that it was called Guyver. Scholars of the time had thought it to be of a tongue spoken by the gods themselves. The Ancient Spirits of Evil, however, had shown him what it had truly been.

It had been the weapon which drove the gods away. A weapon they had created.

"I still know too little though" the ancient undead mage grumbled as he made his way back to the sarcophagus. Such a thing galled Mumm-Ra to no end. To think that he, Mumm-Ra the Ever Living, he who had lived for thousands upon thousands of generations, was facing something he knew next to nothing about! Had he not slumbered during the time of Second Earth...

Griping about something he could not have helped would serve no purpose. He would learn more after restoring his power.

The kittens had overslept, which none of the other ThunderCats minded one bit that day. They stood around the twins, the piles of pancakes and candyfruit Snarf had prepared for the two in short order completely demolished with empty dishes in their wake, and each adult with their own very real sense

of relief.

"Aw, man!" came WilyKat's satisfied groan. "That was great!"

"Yeah," Wilykit agreed. "Thanks, Snarf!"

"Aw, shneeyarf, it was nothin'!"

"You two feelin' okay?" Panthro asked with a grin.

"Good enough to drive the ThunderTank," Kat said with a wink.

"I think he's still a little out of it, Tygra," the panther joked, which generated a few chuckles from the others.

"Hey, can't blame me for trying," WilyKat said.

"So," WilyKit began, "we're okay?"

"I think so," Tygra replied, "but I'd like for the two of you to stay in the infirmary today."

"Whaaaaat?" they cried in unison.

"We're not in trouble or anything, are we?"

"No, WilyKat," Lion-O said. "Besides, it's just for today."

"We're not sick or anything, right?" WilyKat asked, nervous this time.

"I feel fine..." his sister added.

"Now, now," Cheetara said soothingly, "don't worry. Just get some rest. After what you two went through yesterday, you need it."

"In the morning, you two will be back on your spaceboards again. I promise."

"Well..."

"Okay."

"These two need their rest, shnarf shnarf!" Snarf said. "So shoo. Old Snarf will take care of them, don't you worry!"

"So, how is it?" Panthro asked once they were safely clear of the infirmary.

"There aren't any immediate signs," Tygra answered. His face was drawn and solemn, worry etched into every line, "but it can be hard to tell sometimes."

"What?" Lion-O demanded. "What are you talking about? Is anything wrong..."

"Lion-O," Panthro began, unsure of how exactly to say it.

"We have no definite proof, and..."

"Just come out and say it, I'm not a child! If anything is wrong with Kat and Kit, I need to know about it!"

He watched as Panthro, Cheetara, and Tygra exchanged worried looks. The dread, which he had nearly forgotten about, returned to settle in his gut like a lead weight. They had looked a little pale, now that he thought about it

"You know how Thundrainium weakens Thunderians..."

"Yes." The dread grew exponentially, coating Lion-O's nerves in its icy grip.

"It's because Thundrainium emits a peculiar form of radiation," Cheetara picked up from Tygra's lead. "It is harmless to other creatures..."

"But to us," Panthro took the lecture next. "overexposure to it can be lethal."

Lion-O's mouth opened, but no speech could escape his throat. This couldn't be happening. He prayed that he was dreaming, that he would wake up and none of this would have happened and he could forget about it over a heaping plate of Snarf's meat-and-veggiefruit omellettes and juice...

No. This WAS happening, and nothing could change that.

"That generator," Panthro continued, "emitted concentrated Thundrainium radiation, and the kittens were exposed to it for who knows how long."

"Do... do they..."

"We don't know for certain if they even have Thundrainium poisoning yet," Tygra explained, hopeful. "The signs don't always set in right away, and they're still recovering from mild heatstroke. Pumyra will be here later, and we'll observe them to see if there's any poisoning."

"Have faith, Lion-O," Cheetara said, though he could see she was as worried as the rest. "Just because it may be doesn't mean it is or will be."

"Yes. You're right." For a brief moment, he could have sworn he had heard Jaga's voice in hers... That certainly sounded like something he'd say. "Does Snarf know?"

"No," Tygra said. "You know how much of a worrier he is."

"Well, he does now."

As one, the other three ThunderCats spun on their heels to find a terrified-looking Snarf standing just behind them.

"I... I didn't mean to eavesdrop, shneeyarf, but I was..."

"You listen, Snarf," Panthro growled. "Not a word of this to WilyKat and WilyKit, understand? Not. A. Word. Or you'll have ME to deal with!"

"Shnaaaarf.... I'll go make lunch...." Snarf's voice was thin, shaking with each syllable. "Maybe.... one of you should take it to them... shnarf snarf..."

"Nan desu ka?" the boy said as Analee crouched slowly down next to him. Willa looked on from his right, anxious for any sign of... well... anything, really. He looked about his surroundings in confusion, deep blue eyes wide and a touch frightened. "Anata ga desu?"

"What is he saying?" Willa asked as Analee reached down to check his pulse. The boy flinched briefly as her fingers found his wrist.

"I have no idea," the healer replied. Apparently satisfied that his pulse was indeed normal, she placed two fingers of each hand to both sides of his neck. He almost jerked away from her, more of that staccatto language bursting from his lips.

"Yameno!" he shouted.

"Poor thing is scared out of his wits," Analee said softly. "Don't worry," she said, her voice soft and reassuring, "I won't hurt you."

He looked at her as if unsure of her intentions.

"English?"

"Don't worry, boy..."

"You speak English?"

Willa felt her jaw drop open in surprise. She had no idea what this "English" was, but he certainly did speak her language.

"Ah," Analee said, her kindly old face lit up in a smile. "So, we can understand each other!"

"Who are you?" he said, "Where am I?"

"You're in the Treetop Kingdom of the Warrior Maidens," Willa said with more than a hint of authority. "We saved your life yesterday."

"You... did?" His sea-blue eyes fell on hers - and only her eyes, Willa noted. "Thank you." He ducked his head and shoulders in a short bow.

"This is the healer Analee," the well-muscled, dark-haired woman said, indicating the older - more grandmotherly - one whom had checked his pulse earlier. "And I am Willa, Queen of the Warrior Maidens."

"I am pleased to meet you, Your Highness," he said, bowing again and realizing with some embarrassment that a thin blanket was all that stood between him and the world.

"There's no need to call me that," Willa said with a chuckle. "Just Willa will do."

"Okay. Thank you, Willa."

"So," the woman, Analee, said, "What's your name?"

"Me? I'm..." He thought for a moment, surprised that he couldn't...

(Sho. Your name is...)

"Sho."

"That's a strange name," Willa said. "Where are you from?"

"I... I..." Sho searched the depths of his memory, finding only blackness. Why did that seem so...

comforting? "I... don't know..."

"You don't?" Analee asked as she ran her fingers over his temples in short concentric circles.

"I don't remember. I'm trying, but I just don't remember anything."

Willa stepped into the mid-morning sunshine which filtered through the leaves above with Analee. All about, the Warrior Maidens went about their daily business. Some leapt from the walkways above the forest floor to waiting vines for patrol of their territory, others carried bushels of fruits or small children.

"Amnesia, is it?" she asked.

"Yes. The boy was not lying," the old healer replied.

"But, he remembered his name."

"Memory loss affects people in different ways," Analee said as she leaned on her staff. "As such, I did not bother to ask about the things on his back."

"He recovered rather quickly, though."

"He did, at that. I thought for sure it would be another day at least before he woke up."

"You wished to see us, Willa?" A slender woman with dark red hair tied in a tail to the middle of her back said. Her companion, a shorter and more muscled woman with a honey-blonde mane stood beside

her.

"Yes, Mari. You and Seles are to keep watch over Sho."

"He is the boy you rescued yesterday?" Seles asked with a touch of curiosity.

"Yes. He is mostly free to walk about the Treetop Kingdom, but you two will escort him at all times," Willa explained. "At sundown, Rhianna and Brie will relieve you."

"Understood," Mari said curtly.

"He is inside my hut," Analee said, "and he will sleep there tonight."

"How long will he be here?" Seles asked.

Hopefully not long, Willa almost said. "Until he recovers enough to be on his way."

"You're not thinking about sending him away with no knowledge of who he is, are you?" Analee whispered as Mari and Seles took positions on each side of the hut's entrance. "And especially as frail as he looks..."

"If he was able to get here from wherever he came from like that," Willa replied, "then there is little to worry about. I'll have two Warrior Maidens escort him to the edge of our territory..."

"That's not what I mean. He has no memory aside from his own name! He wouldn't last a day..."

"Analee," Willa interrupted, "you said it yourself. He may be a threat."

"I also said that he may NOT be a threat, young one."

"You may be the best healer in the kingdom," Willa began, "but the safety of the Warrior Maidens is MY responsibility." Willa glanced back to the entrance of Analee's hut, wishing Sho had wound up anywhere else on Third Earth. "He should be done dressing now."

The pants fit fairly well, Sho was pleased to discover. They were stitched from an animal hide - which animal he did not know - and were surprisingly comfortable to wear. As he slid on the thin sleeveless shirt, he pondered his surroundings.

Nothing seemed familiar, not the hanging bushels of strange-smelling herbs nor the forest beyond the hut's window. Willa - attractive as she was - seemed even more alien to him than what little he had seen of this Treetop Kingdom. As he laced up the front of the tan shirt, a feeling of wrongness crept over him. Sho couldn't put his finger on what or why, but the feeling that he didn't belong here was becoming strong.

"What on Earth..."

(Third Earth)

Sho froze, every nerve alight with tension and alarm. He was alone in this hut, he knew that, so where did...

(Your world is Third Earth now)

"Who... who said that?"

"I said nothing."

Sho looked up with a startled shout to find Willa standing in the open doorway. She stared at him quizzically, as if she were certain he had lost his mind. Sho was beginning to wonder about that himself.

"Oh, sorry, Willa," Sho managed. His face flushed with embarrassed heat as he finished securing his clothing. "I just thought you'd said something."

"No," she said as she stepped closer. Sho almost couldn't help but notice the length of her legs the short tunic showed, and had to fight to keep his eyes on hers. He had a strange feeling that allowing them to roam would do more harm than good, especially if she was a queen.

But, he had still heard that voice, so maddeningly familiar...

He wrapped his cloak tightly about his frame as he neared the edge of Hook Mountain which faced the

grasslands beyond Snowman's kingdom. He wished he had summoned the Guyver for this part of Third Earth - the cold here was a bitch - but knew that he could no longer afford to do so without Mumm-Ra noticing. He had felt the evil eyes upon him ever since yesterday. The demon priest knew of him, and must know of the power he posessed.

Mumm-Ra could never claim the Guyver for himself. The only artifact that would have allowed it had been destroyed over two thousand years ago. But there were other artifacts of that war that would afford him even greater power than he already had. Sho Fukamachi was the key to that.

He is with the Warrior Maidens, he thought as he slogged through another snowdrift. Sho could have wound up among better company than that anachronistic tribe of amazons, but at least he was safe. For now.

He had been surprised that Sho's memory had failed him. He'd had to tell him his own name, and now Sho thought that perhaps he was going insane. He made a note to keep telepathic communication with him to a minimum. The last thing he needed was someone as powerful as Sho to go mad.

But, without even the knoweldge of that power...

He decided, then, to head toward the Treetop Kingdom. He couldn't get too close - not without summoning the Guyver again - but he would at least be able to better keep tabs on the now-awake Sho Fukamachi. Of course, he would have to be out of range of the sensor arrays in Cat's Lair, but that was easily done. He had evaded their security before. He'd faced much tougher opposition than the Warrior Maidens and the ThunderCats.

Pumyra waved a quick good-bye to Lynx-O and Bengali as the ThunderStrike lifted off from the grass in front of Cat's Lair. She didn't bother to watch as her two comrades rose skyward for the short hop to the

Tower of Omens. There were more important things to attend to.

"I'm glad you came, Pumyra," Tygra said as he completed his sprint across the drawbridge and joined her at the end.

"I just wish it was under better circumstances," the she-puma said as she re-shouldered her bag of medicines. "It almost seems as if we only see each other in an emergency."

"This might not be," Tygra replied. "At least, I hope it isn't."

"You said the kittens were ill?" Pumyra asked.

"They suffered mild heatstroke from being kidnapped by the Mutants..."

"You told me that, already."

"Yes, I did, didn't I?"

"What is it, Tygra?" Pumyra knew when her friend was agitated.

"The Mutants created a machine that emits concentrated Thudrainium radiation..."

"Thundrainium poisoning," Pumyra said. "Tygra, I hope you're wrong."

"I hope I am, too."

"I don't really have the medicines or experience to treat such a dreadful condition."

"Here's hoping you won't need it. Nonetheless, I'm glad you came."

"So am I."

The two ThunderCats walked back across the drawbridge, both clinging to the hope that this would turn out to be nothing after all.

Most of the Mutant clans hated puzzles. The tribes of Plundarr lived for pillage and conquest, not plotting and deceit. Monkians and Jackalmen were among the worst for believing in matter over mind.

Slythe, however, knew that guile and deception went a long way toward achieving one's goals. Brute force alone wasn't always enough, especially when dealing with an enemy like the ThunderCats. Even moreso when dealing with an ally like Mumm-Ra. The leader of the Reptillian Clan reviewed the details of Vultureman's death at the hands of what that decrepit mummy had called "Guyver", and began to wonder.

Why would Mumm-Ra, after all this time, order the Mutants not to engage the ThunderCats without him? He could no more use the power of the Eye of Thundera than Slythe himself could. Or, perhaps that wasn't as true as the ancient demon priest wanted others to think? And, if that was true, then perhaps Slythe could seize its power for himself?

He filed that away for later as he downed his second goblet of what Third Earthers called whiskey. If nothing else, these backward primitives knew how to make good hooch. He decided against a third - his head was buzzing well enough - when it occured to him.

Perhaps Mumm-Ra was afraid of the Guyver? No, that wasn't quite right. He was wary of it. That would certainly explain his warning.

It was decided. The deep-space transmitter they had spent months building was ready. It was time for the Mutants to claim what was rightfully theirs and plunder this ridiculous planet for all it was worth. That black-armored Guyver thing would have to wait, if only for a while.

In the next episode:

The players take their positions, and the pieces begin to move in the final contest for the fate of all who live. All this and more in the next episode of One Last War to Fight.