ThunderCats Used Without Permission

The Visitor

By Knight Writer

Chapter One: Dead Memories

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Pain.

You live your life thinking you know what it really is. A burned hand, a cracked bone, even a broken heart. You think that, no matter how bad it gets, pain will eventually go away.

You're wrong.

Some pain is so deep, so intense, that it exists on an elemental level within you. It becomes a constant companion, ever-present, defining every aspect of your life. It begins to change you, twist you into someone you'd never recognize no matter how long you stare into a mirror. You do things that you would never have thought yourself capable of because of it. And, it never goes away.

Never. No matter what you do. One could even say it drives you mad.

The longer I think on it, the more I believe that's what's happened to me. I've gone off the deep end into an abyss so deep there seems to be no bottom. That would certainly explain why I've come here. Before, the mere notion of my mission here would have soured my stomach and sent me on a smarmy discourse on good and evil. Now, though, it makes perfect sense. Right and wrong aren't as clearly defined as I'd always been led to believe. Sometimes, the right thing looks for all the world like the exact opposite. All it takes is a tiny shift in perception to see it.

I look about after striking camp, making sure to leave no trace of my presence. I know it's futile, but the longer I can move without them knowing about me the easier it will be. For a damn lot of reasons. I ask myself, again, as I shoulder the heavy pack if I'll be able to handle seeing them, if I'll be able to deal with them should they try to interfere.

I know they will. They won't be able to help themselves. It's what they do.

They have their mission, and I have mine. It's really as simple as that...

I freeze at the sudden sound, every sense on alert. It's a sound I've heard hundreds of times, and it fills me with a rush of adrenaline and anxiety. I don't let myself feel any sort of anticipation. I just hide behind the thick trunk of a handy tree and pray I don't see who's making that sound. I silently plead that she'll just race on by without slowing, cursing my rotten luck all the while.

She stops, and it's like... I have no idea how to describe it. Seeing her standing where I'd just struck camp is so unreal that my brain feels as if it's ripping itself apart. Despite myself, I edge out just a little further, just to see her. It's been so long. The spotted blonde hair is as full and lush as I remember, and I can almost feel its strands moving between my fingers the way it did that time before...

Smile for me, I think, *let me see your smile again.* Her face is set in a curious mein, looking around and obviously puzzled.

I know I should leave. I know that staring at her is going to become easier and easier the longer I do it. I know she'll find me if I don't move my ass. Of them all, it had to be her I ran into first. I have to wonder if the powers that be in this thing we so ignorantly call reality are having a laugh at my expense.

She sniffs the air, and my nerves tighten. My scent's all over the place, and she's wondering just what the hell it's doing there. My muscles tense up, the sight of her toned back and legs in that leotard burning itself into my tortured mind. For a moment, one very seductive moment, I see myself walking into the open clearing. Showing myself to her, taking her in my arms and lowering her to the fragrant earth and...

No. I can't. The fact that I shouldn't even be here is reason enough. Besides, the insane sight before me confirms something.

He's here. No question of that, as though I'd had any. Hopes that maybe he wasn't, but no doubts he was. Clearly bewildered, she shakes her head before darting off into the trees once more. It had been entirely too close a call, but the danger was past. Time to go. I turned away and set out into the wood. I'd gotten my bearings the night before from the stars, but I had no idea if everything was where it was supposed to be.

"I knew that was your scent." My heart tries to pole-vault out of my mouth at her words, a throbbing ache taking up residence in the space left at her voice. "What are you doing out here?"

"Camping," I say. I refuse to face her. Maybe that makes me a coward but I can't bear to see her face. I don't hear any accusation in her words, but my imagination puts it there on the replay.

"Why didn't you tell anyone?" I hear her steps come nearer and I prepare for what I have to do. Jaga, I didn't think it would be so hard! "You have to..." At the feel of her presence just behind me, I turn. Fast as I can.

I do something that, before, I would never have so much as countenanced.

I hit her.

My arm shot out, my fist slamming home right in her solar plexus. I feel the tears stinging the corners of my eyes, force myself not to look at her as she slumps forward with a whoosh of air from her lungs. She goes limp and I gently lower her to the ground. Funny what the darkness can

do to a man. I hate myself even more for this, but there's no other choice. The rope I used to set up my tent gets put to another use altogether after I scale several nearby branches with her over my shoulder. My window of stealth just got a lot shorter, but I have to save as much as I can. He'll know what's happened here soon enough, and I need to slow him down here. Any way I can.

Once done, I stare at her as she dangles heels over head above the ground. I made the bindings secure almost to the point of cutting off blood flow, and part of me wants to loosen them, just a little.

Too late to back out now.

Her eyes flutter open and lock onto me, confused and not a little angry at the predicament she now found herself in. Not that I can blame her.

"What is the meaning of this?" she demands. "Release me right now!"

"No can do," I say before knotting the kerchief between her teeth. "I have to get you out of the way for a while. Believe me, I hate having to do this, but I don't have a choice." She glares daggers at me, then rapiers and broadswords as her words are swallowed. "When I'm done, this world will be a better place." Deep down, I don't know if I really believe that, but I'll hang onto any illusion I can. I ignore her muffled shouts as I leap down and retrieve my pack.

It takes an effort of will to keep myself from turning back. Just for one last look, even if she's indisposed. That's all it'll take to wear my resolve down to nothing.

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The day had broken warm and somewhat humid, yet the air was redolent with the perfumes of early spring. Flowers were budding amid wild grasses, their aromas thick and sweet.

"*Ah-CHOO!*"

As was the pollen. Lion-O looked over at Panthro as the elder ThunderCat steered the ThunderTank across the gently rolling plains. He rubbed his reddened eyes, swearing under his breath.

"You sure you're up for this?" Lion-O asked, suppressing a grin.

"Takes more'n a case of the sniffles to keep me down," Panthro nearly snarled. "Damn allergies. Never had 'em on Thundera, don't see why I gotta have 'em here." Lion-O knew better than to make a crack about Panthro's age catching up with him. Some lines even the Lord of the ThunderCats couldn't cross.

"Besides, we *do* need to source out some new Thundrillium reserves," he said instead. "Those Lunattaks have been acting up more and more lately."

"Them and those damn Mutants," Panthro agreed. "Mumm-Ra's got plenty of henchfreaks to do his dirty work for him."

"Do you ever think we'll see the end of all this?"

"I don't think that far ahead, Lion-O. Can't afford to lose track of the here and now."

"Speaking of," Lion-O said, "the scanner's getting some positive readings."

"About time, too," Panthro replied. "I was starting to think we were drilling a dry hole here. How far?"

"About ten klicks northwest. Looks like a nice supply, too!" Enough to top off the hoppers of both Cat's Lair and the Tower of Omens at least, he guessed. "I don't like that we're out of comm range with the Lair, though."

"Can't be helped. We need this stuff, and our shafts are starting to get low near home. You thinking ambush?"

"It wouldn't surprise me," Lion-O said as he glanced down at the Sword of Omens, secure within the claw shield on his hip. "At least the Mutants and the Lunattaks don't have the whole teamwork thing down."

"Then we *would* be in some trouble," Panthro agreed. The ride continued in silence for several minutes as Lion-O kept his eyes on the scanner and on the Eye of Thundera.

"Yeah, this is a good stash," he said, mostly to break the monotony. "We just hit paydirt."

"I'll mark it off as soon as as I lay eyes on it myself. Sooner we get some equipment up here the better. Who're we in comm range of?"

"The only signal I can pick up is Cheetara's," Lion-O replied. "We went the farthest out. I'll call her over." Lion-O activated the ThunderTank's comm unit and locked in her frequency. "Cheetara, come in." Silence was his reply. "ThunderTank to Cheetara, please respond."

"Intereference?"

"The signal strength's good," Lion-O said on checking the relevant displays on the comm unit. "The frequency's clear. She should be receiving us."

"Something's wrong," Panthro said just as the Eye of Thundera growled. "I knew it..."

"Sword of Omens," Lion-O commanded as he rose from his seat and the ThunderTank came to a quick stop, "give me sight beyond sight!" Within the Eye's second sight, he saw Cheetara crumple from a blow to her stomach delivered by someone he couldn't quite make out. Her

unknown assailant began to procure rope from a nearby backpack which seemed stuffed full just as the vision faded.

"Someone's just attacked Cheetara!" Lion-O shouted, lowering the Sword. "She's been captured!"

"Son of a... Where?!"

"East! Twenty klicks!" The ThunderTank's engine roared as the rear treads spewed dirt skyward. Lion-O kept the Sword of Omens ready, already thinking about putting his fist directly in the stranger's face.

"So who was it? Mutants or Lunattaks?!"

"I don't know," he said, perturbed by that. "The Sword didn't show me, but it didn't look like anyone from either camp. Whoever it was managed to sucker punch her."

"Cheetara knows better than to get that close to anyone who's a potential threat," Panthro replied, a touch wary.

"Might have been a slave trader," Lion-O said as the distance between them and the forest she had been in vanished. "We've been told they can be a problem in the northern parts of the continent."

"Whatever, there's no way we're gonna let this bastard just grab Cheetara like that!"

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Cheetara felt gravity pulling her blood into her head as she dangled above the ground. An uncomfortable distance above the ground, at least in her current state.

How dare he do this! she silently raged. *What's gotten into him?! Has he gone nuts?* She looked up at the twists and coils of rope that both held her immobile and suspended from the thick branch. Neither showed any signs of breaking any time soon. Several loops held her legs, cinched off above her knees and on her thighs. Her forearms were tied at her back, connected to the coils around her arms and torso. She couldn't believe what he'd done to her, that he was even capable of something like that. *When I get free...* In the distance, she heard the ThunderTank approach the edge of the trees and would have smiled if the gag had let her. Panthro had to have figured something was wrong when she didn't respond to the comm circuit in her staff.

Wait, how does he know I'm here? She eased her struggling, closing her eyes in thought. Given what had just happened, this timely rescue just could not add up. The only way Panthro could know she was here was via the Eye's second sight, and there was no way that could be the case. The conundrum took enough attention to help blot out the dull ache in her abdomen from that punch. *He's gonna pay for that one as well!* Cheetara promised herself she'd get a piece of him

before the others. This was far too much for a prank, and Cheetara held no patience for pranksters in the first place. *Camping, indeed!*

"Cheetara!" Panthro called, though she had trouble judging the distance due to the echoes. Panthro and Lion-O both started shouting her name in earnest, both coming closer and rustling the undergrowth.

"MMMMMMMMMMM!!!" she shouted as loudly as she could and began to wildly thrash about as Panthro came into view. The other ThunderCat paused at the muffled noise, looking around and then up.

"Great Jaga!" he exclaimed on seeing her. "*Lion-O! Over here!!*"

Lion-O slashed at the underbrush as he charged in the direction of Panthro's voice, worry gnawing at him just as he caught sight of the other ThunderCat leaping into the boughs of a tree. He followed Panthro up and did a double-take at the sight of Cheetara trussed up.

"Moons of Thundera, what *happened* here?" He saw the unbridled fury in Cheetara's eyes as Panthro slashed away the cord which held her aloft and caught her in his grasp befor leaping nimbly down the branches to land at the base of the tree. Lion-O sheathed the Sword of Omens as Panthro set her down and removed the gag.

"Just *what*," she began, glaring at him, "the *hell* are you playing at, Lion-O?!!" The pure rage in her voice took him by surprise, even moreso than her actual words.

"Um... you're welcome?" he tried lamely.

"*Don't play coy with me!!!*" she shrieked. "How *dare* you do something like this! Damnit, Lion-O, I thought you were more mature than this!"

"You want to start from the top, Cheetara?" Panthro asked, looking between the two of them.

"Maybe one of you wants to untie me?!" she shot back. "No, make that Panthro. I don't want him *near* me until I can tear a piece of his hide!"

"Cheetara!"

"Don't try that royal tone with *me*! Jaga only knows how many cheap feels you copped while I was out! Enjoy it, you deviant?!"

"Until you calm down, it might be safer to leave you like this," Panthro said, utterly bewildered.

"Wait, you think *I* did this?!" Lion-O said after finding his voice once again.

"I know you did! I was here, and so were you!"

"He couldn't have been," Panthro replied. "He's been with me since first light."

"We haven't been out of each other's sight for about five hours," Lion-O added. "Besides, you know I'd never pull a stupid stunt like this!"

"Believe us," Panthro said, "Lion-O couldn't have done this."

"Then who did?" she asked, visibly calming down. "He looked just like Lion-O."

"An impostor," he said, replacing the Sword of Omens. "Why do I get the feeling Mumm-Ra's involved in this?"

"Was the fake really so convincing?"

"Are you going to free me or not?!"

"Right," Panthro replied, setting to work on the knots. Within moments, he had the ropes loose and Cheetara rose to her feet. She took a few deep breaths, visibly restraining her anger. After what felt like half of eternity, she turned her smoldering gaze to Lion-O.

"I feel like I should apologize, but..."

"No," she replied. "Panthro has even less patience for things like this than I do, and he'd never be party to it. If he says you were with him, I believe it and I apologize for going off on you." She looked at Panthro before continuing. "Yes, this impostor was very convincing. He looked, sounded, even smelled just like Lion-O. Most of all, he felt the same," she said, tapping her temple for emphasis. "I literally couldn't tell any difference."

"This is weird," Panthro groused. "If this fake was Mumm-Ra, why leave you as a living wind chime? Why not just drag you into his pyramid? Or somewhere else he had a trap set?"

"I don't know," Cheetara replied. "Either way, we can't just charge into the Black Pyramid. That might be his goal."

"Let's head back to Cat's Lair," Lion-O said. "From there, we can alert the others. Best we regroup and figure out just what the hell's going on here."

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"That's what I want to know," Mumm-Ra said as he beheld the image in his cauldron. The undead mage had noticed the strange energy which had breached the fabric of space-time several days prior, and had yet been unable to find what had come through. This latest development gave him some clues, but no real answers.

"Someone who can pass as Lion-O," he muttered as Ma-Mutt curled up at his feet. "Who is he? What does he want?" Mumm-Ra had been utterly confounded in trying to track him, and seeing

what this one had done to Cheetara had been humorous if not enlightening. Who or whatever this other Lion-O was, he was able to hide from Mumm-Ra's sight. How was that possible?

"Perhaps the ThunderCats will make a good stalking horse," he said at length before turning to his sarcophagus. "Yes. Let them do the hard work, then I swoop in for the reward. Simplistic, but effective."

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I've made some progress, but I have no idea if I've made enough. This tract of forest is little different from others I've slogged through. Even though I'm on the far edge, the effects of the Forest Of Silence are still reaching out. I can't even hear myself breathe until...

The sound of normal noises reaches my ears. I'd always hated the Forest of Silence, and this little detour did nothing to improve my outlook on it. I hear it again, a rustling in the leaves above. I can think of only two who can move through the branches like that, an only one is on my list.

I can only hope it's the one I'm looking for. It will be *so* satisfying. I tell myself that, even if it is him it cannot be, and promptly ignore it. I take to the limbs myself, nimbly leaping from one massive branch to the next as I catch the distinct aroma of Monkian. He's been through here, and recently too.

I can see, in one of the horrific visions my mind sometimes summons just to fuck with me, the savagery evident in the twisted and broken form of WilyKit lying in a pool of her life's blood and him standing over her, laughing. So young, too young for her ultimate end...

I shake my head clear before moving on, willing my hand to stop squeezing the bark of the branch. If I let myself relive those memories, I'll start screaming. Again.

And I'm not sure if I'll be able to stop.

I hate this forest, Tygra thought as the strange muffling effect of the Forest of Silence muted his steps, his breathing, every sound. All he could hear were his own thoughts, which he let ramble a bit just for the company. If one wanted solitude and silence, one just had to take a trip through the sound-dampening trees. *How can they do it, I wonder?* In the perfect silence, the tiny noises startled him. He was nearing the edge, and as always the return of audible sound was welcome. Even so, he nearly didn't catch the sound of Monkian's grunting breaths in time to duck out of sight.

What is he doing here? Tygra lowered himself into the underbrush, knowing that the flash his whip made while cloaking him would draw most unwelcome attention. The Mutant stood in the small clearing, looking about as though he knew he was not alone. Tygra could think of nothing the Mutants or the Lunattaks would find of value within the forest, there wasn't so much as a nugget of Thundrillium to be had, but he could not let the chance to gather some intelligence on their activities to pass him by.

Monkian had leapt down to the forest floor, having cleared the silent zone, and gazed about sharply to find a trace of whoever was tailing him. Though far from the sharpest knife in any drawer, he was no idiot when it came to recognizing signs of being followed. He readied his mace, scowling at the branches above. Warrior Maidens never came out to these woods, and preferred to challenge upfront rather than stalk their enemies, so he ruled them out. That left only ThunderCats.

"Come on out, kitty!" he called mockingly. "I've got a treat for you!" *My mace upside your head!* No reply sounded, no rustle of leaves. "What's wrong? Scared?" As the spiked ball swung about on its chain, Monkian began to have doubts about his earlier certainty. He *could* have been wrong, but something told him he was not. "I'm getting sick of this, Tygra!" he bellowed, knowing it had to be the striped cat who was ghosting him.

"Not even close." Startled, Monkian whirled about to see Lion-O to his left, arms crossed over his chest and a look of fury on his face which the Mutant had never seen before. The Thunderian's eyes blazed, radiating murderous intent and intense hate. "It's been awhile. So to speak."

"Huh?" Something seemed wrong about Lion-O, but Monkian couldn't place what until he saw that Lion-O was without the Sword of Omens or the claw shield. "Heh. Forget something this morning?"

"I can never forget," Lion-O snarled as he drew from a sheath on his hip a curved blade with a wickedly sharp hook set into the edge. "Never forget what you did."

"Say what?" Monkian tilted his head slightly in confusion and just barely had time to react when Lion-O lunged.

The blade whistles as I swing it in a short arc toward Monkian's neck, a tactic to get me closer to him. Inside the arc of his weapon, the spiked ball at the end of its chain is useless. A short jab from my left hand lands squarely in his face, and the feel of my knuckles crunching bone calls up in me a killing rage unlike any I've known. It races in my blood and fills my mouth with its taste as the memories return and I see Kit on the floor, I hear her echoing final cry over and over and over as my fists and my feet slam home into Monkian.

His face is broken and bloodied, shallow cuts from the tip of my knife marring his flesh in various places on his torso and legs. Monkian is barely standing, his weapon having been dropped from a right arm that is now bent at an unnatural angle. I don't even recall how many times I hit him, or of slicing into him with my blade. All I know is the rage in my heart which makes each beat feel like an explosion of pure hate. The tide begins to ebb slightly as I grasp him by the natty scruff of his neck and yank him upright.

Are you really going to do this? my much-abused conscience asks me. *He's not responsible for what...* I shut that voice out, the one which sounds so much like Jaga, and make sure Monkian's still conscious. I can't let doubt keep me from what I have to do.

"Whu... Wait..." he pleads weakly as I hold the blade up for him to see.

"I waited once, and *oh* what it cost me." I know I'm not making any sense to him, but I don't care. I crossed distances no one else could even *consider* to get here, and for this.

The curved niche in the blade does its work well as I bring it across Monkian's stomach. The gutting knife opens his abdomen like a zipper, spilling his foul-smelling innards out of their protective space and into the open air. His howl almost drowns out Kit's last cry in my head. I step back as he falls to his knees. His hands slip over the ropy loops of his intestines, trying to put them back in amid the blood gushing from the ruin of his innards.

Much as I want him to suffer, though, I know I have to put an end to it. I may have fallen about as far as any man can fall, but I'll still put a wounded animal out of its misery. I snatch Monkian's head back up just before I slam the knife under his chin and up through his mouth into his brain. He stiffens as the blade slices through and the force of my arm pokes the tip up through his skull. I drop him, leaving Monkian looking as though he were in a state of meditation if not for the fact that his guts were now steaming in the late morning air.

"Rest in peace," I say as I step back. "It's more than you deserve."

"*WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?!*"

Aw, shit...

I turn around to face Tygra and marvel at just how many of my friends (They're not your friends, they're dead all dead and you...) I run into. As if Cheetara weren't enough for one day...

"Ridding Third Earth of it's Mutant problem," I reply, waving a hand toward Monkian's cooling corpse. "I'm stunned you never thought of this."

"Lion-O, have you gone *insane*?!" Tygra's shouting, and he nearly never raises his voice. Then again, that was the Tygra I knew.

"Maybe. Sure seems that way most of the time." I take a step toward him, and he takes another back. He looks at me as though he's never seen me before, and the knowledge that he in fact hadn't nearly makes me burst out in laughter. "Look," I say instead.

"You need help," Tygra says, cutting me off in mid-witty-remark. "Just come with me. Something's wrong with you." His voice is like that of someone dealing with a raving lunatic, calm and reassuring. For all he knows, that's exactly what he's dealing with. For all *I* know, as well.

"You have no idea," I mutter. "Just stay out of my way, Tygra. This doesn't need to get any uglier than it already is."

"This isn't right, Lion-O," he replies, and I just know he's going to try to subdue me. If I'd known Tygra the *freaking* invisible had been around, Monkian might have had the end of his life put off.

(What are you gonna do?) my conscience asks me. (Kill him?)

No.

"Did I ever tell you," I begin, "how much I really appreciated all those talks about the meaning of the Code?" He still thinks I'm the other one, and there's no need to disillusion him yet. "Or how much your guidance meant to me?" Every word is true, and I curse the fact that I never told him. Maybe this is my only real chance to do so now.

"I'm glad to hear that." He's tense and about to spring. Tygra has to know that he can't out-muscle me, so he'll go for a surprise blow. I relax, looking as though I'm dropping my guard.

Tygra falls for it, leaping toward me hoping to get me into a joint lock. I can't go easy on him, can't pull the punch which lands on his temple and throws his trajectory off. He lands awkwardly, down but not out. Even as the memory of the Tygra of my past sacrificing himself to buy time for those of us left to escape the hordes, I descend on him with a savage right hook that slams him into the ground. I know I should knock him all

the way out, but I just can't. My arm refuses to pull back, my fingers do not form a fist.

"You're sick," Tygra says, his voice unsteady.

"I know I am," I say as I rip a few hairs from my head and grasp one of his hands. I curl his fingers over them, clasping tight to make sure he doesn't drop them. "I know Pumyra can analyze these. Make sure she does. And tell *him* that if he wants answers, he knows where to find me."

I walk away, fighting the roiling darkness of my memories as I head back to my pack. If *he's* anything like me, he'll figure out where I'm gonna hole up. If I'm going to run into them over and over on this mission, best to get the biggest dustup out of the way as soon as possible.

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Who is this man who looks like Lion-O? What has happened to turn him onto the path of blood and murder? What is his true purpose? Tune in for the next chapter of The Visitor.