In Vegas Veritas

By Nine Tiger

His youth had journeyed down a path he no longer followed. The offerings of the day had lessened. A faded photograph remained.

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"That's the end of it, thank Jaga!" Panthro shouted. With a grunt he tossed a large chunk of thundrillium into a metal cart attached to the back of the Thundertank. The grey panther turned to his companion who still held a sizable rock. "Leave that one behind for next time, Tygra," he ordered. "I am ready for a detour to the Balkin village for a tall beer."

The architect said, "As you wish, Panthro. But don't you think we should change out of our work clothes and into our uniforms first? Look at us. We are covered in mud and dust from the two patches we worked today."

"You more than me, but that is because you never watch your footing, cub. However, you're right, and a quick dip in the River would get us cleaned up enough."

Tygra frowned. No swimming for him, but a bucket and a towel would work. He shrugged dismissively to hide the discomfort that his phobia generated. A delicate breeze finally rose, a pleasant change from the hot, still air that had plagued them during their work.

Panthro's thundrillium detector unexpectedly sounded. The warrior growled, "What is with this thing today?" He tapped the device in his hand, and shook his head in annoyance. "Why are these readings through the roof? Something is not right here. Tygra, put that rock down, and come take a look at this. Maybe your brain can make some sense of this."

"You are the engineer, Panthro. But I will--"

The last thing he saw was Panthro's astonished face as a sparkling whirlwind engulfed him.

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He hurt. That was the one thing of which he was certain, which meant that he was not dead. Tygra opened his eyes, his surroundings slowly coming into focus. Despite the darkness, he noted that he was in a chamber of some kind. He could see a sweep of stars through the structure's ragged and damaged roof. He pulled himself up into a sitting position, his whole right side throbbing with the pain of a hard landing. Where in the cat's-eyed cosmos am I? he thought. He reached into the pocket of his torn trousers. "Gone," he muttered when he discovered that his communicator was no longer on his person.

"Won't get out of here by sitting!" he snarled. He ran his fingers through his striped mane, picking out bits of plaster and debris. With a grunt he managed to get himself unsteadily to his feet. He took a step forward. Nothing broken, but by Jaga's teeth, I will limp, he decided. He wondered how far the building he had found himself in was from Cats' Lair, and if Mumm-Ra had taken an evil hand in his predicament.

Thanking the gods for his superior night vision, Tygra edged his way toward what appeared to be a door. As he approached, it opened with a slight hiss, the panel retracting into the wall. Beyond the opening, a lighted path appeared in a tunnel.

"Convenient," Tygra said, pleased. He moved onto the path. To his consternation, it began to move. As he struggled to keep his balance, images formed on the walls depicting humans engaging in all manner of frivolity in a city of neon lights. "Looks like the pleasure palaces on Thundera," he mused.

The walkway stopped. A man in strange garb materialized before the Thundercat, almost causing him to lose his footing in surprise. Dressed in armored leather and sandals, the tall human held a helmet decorated with bright red bristles.

"Greetings, Citizen!" the man boomed. "I am the Centurion. What entertainment can the Empire offer you?" The man crackled with static. His color faded slightly.

Tygra said with relief, "Only a hologram." He rubbed his chin. "But maybe still useful. At least he speaks the common tongue of Third Earth." He addressed the Centurion directly. "I do not seek entertainment, only a method of communication or a way back to the Berbil village." He had selected his choice of destination based on the fact that the robot bears had lived in the same spot for many seasons, unlike the Thundercats. It had a good chance of being indexed in the memory of the unseen computer that had to be the source of the hologram.

The Centurion flickered. "Ah, you are in need of a bath and fine clothing." Another door materialized by his left side.

"No! I need the location--"

The Centurion vanished.

Tygra glanced down at his dirty attire. "I might as well get comfortable if this is going to take some time to figure out." He touched the door, and it slid silently open.

Ebony tables upon which rested neat piles of fabric, clothing, and shoes lined the spacious, but windowless, room. Before him stood two beautiful humanoid robots layered in gossamer fabric. The female was made of silver, and the male of gold. "You are a wreck!" the male screeched in a high pitched whine.

The female countered, "What Aureus says is true, but you are also in need of a bath, dear Sir."

Tygra rubbed the back of his neck with his right hand. "You are both correct, but first I need a communication--"

"Argent, he is yours," Aureus announced with irritation.

The female pointed to an arch at the back of the room. It was only then that Tygra realized that the door he had crossed had disappeared. He growled menacingly. "What happened to the entrance!"

Argent's voice tinkled like a bell. "No fear, dear Sir. The way will open after you have bathed and dressed."

"How boorish,"Aureus remarked, his arms folded in disdain.

I'd better accommodate them if I am ever to get out of this maze, Tygra decided glumly.

In the chamber beyond was a sunken marble pool. The Thunderan peeled off his soiled clothing, then slowly sank into the steamy water.

Delicate music played as he soaked, and the lights dimmed. The pain in his body departed. He fought to keep his eyes open. Despite his increasingly drowsy state, he noticed several other silver figures moving in the shadows. Must keep awake, he decided. Something is off here. He forced himself to reach for the soap, and began to lather his orange fur. The perfume in the bar was intoxicating, a rich musky mixture. The soap fell from his hands as his eyes closed.

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A light breeze tickled his fur. In an instant, Tygra shot awake, and leapt from the table upon which he had apparently lain. Yet another room? he wondered nervously.

The two robots cooly appraised him. "Do not be alarmed, dear Sir," Argent murmured. You are just in the dressing chamber. We hope you feel relaxed and refreshed."

"You are really quite the lout," Aureus sniffed. "Our hospitality is clearly wasted on you."

No pain. Perhaps I have misjudged, Tygra thought marking the healing that had occurred to his injuries. "My apologies," he said with a slight, approving nod.

Argent smiled, pleased at his change of demeanor. "Aureus has selected the best garments for you."

"You have an excellent physique, if I must say so, Sir," Aureus added. "It was a pleasure to...measure you. I am sure you attract many admirers." He gestured toward a ebony table upon which rested a single set of clothes. "Black Chinos; cream silk shirt to keep partially open to give a tantalizing peak at your luxurious white chest fur; fine hose, and quality shoes," he rattled off with the precision born of experience. The gold robot picked up a piece of red fabric, and a black

jacket. "A bit of decadence, underneath. A thong will bring lovers aplenty, Sir, given your firm buttocks." He set down the skimpy undergarment almost lovingly back on the pile. "And lastly, a bit of panache in a bomber jacket for an ace lover. As they say, 'Go, Tiger'."

"My name is Tygra, but you are close enough," the Thundercat said with a chuckle.

"Then you may don your clothing, dear Sir," Argent said.

I suppose if I say no to this "thong" thing I will never get out of this place, Tygra thought sheepishly as he dressed under the unerringly watchful eyes of his attendants. It had been a long time since he had known the caress of a tigress. He doubted that the thong would allow him to seduce Cheetara. She would just collapse with laughter, he decided ruefully.

Argent snapped her fingers. A section of the wall parted to reveal a full length mirror. Tygra admired himself. I guess I do cast a handsome figure, he thought smugly.

"You are pleased, dear Sir?" Aureus purred.

"Immensely."

"Then behold!"

Tables covered with all manner of garments rose from the bays hidden beneath the floor. "Clothing fit for a deserving individual, such as yourself," Argent commented.

Tygra fingered the fabric on several outfits. Compared to the unflattering Thundercat uniform he had to wear, the selection before him was a treat. I have worked hard ever since we arrived on Third Earth. I have designed Cats' Lair; taught the kittens; healed the injured, and kept my Lord Lion-o safe, he thought. "I do deserve a new wardrobe," he announced with pride.

"Then this wardrobe shall be yours, dear Sir," Argent said with a clap of her hand. It an instant everything was miraculously boxed and stacked by robotic hands springing from the sides of the tables.

But how do I get it all home? Tygra wondered, the pleasant feeling of having won a prize evaporating with the reality before him. And how do I pay for it?

As if reading his mind, Aureus remarked, "Allow us to preserve your current beauty, and the rest is yours. We guarantee to rotate your attire to fit the season."

"I do not understand," Tygra replied.

Aureus and Argent suddenly flanked him. Another wall panel opened to reveal a circular room. An open glass box stood at its center.

In that instant Tygra knew the price for all the clothing. But the only possible way out of the trap was to pass through the room beyond through a door he spied behind the lethal container. He needed a diversion. He made a wide gesture with his arm. "If I am to be immortalized, I'd prefer to try on a few more clothes! You, Aureus, are a master selection. You can do better than what I have on now. Make me look marvelous!"

Aureus beamed. "Indeed, I would have preferred to put you in more colorful silks, but Argent said that you were not the type for such."

"What can a female know," Tygra added derisively.

"Indeed!" agreed Aureus.

Argent's face became ugly with jealousy. "You are not that fine, dear Sir!" she shrieked at Tygra.

"Such bad manners!" Aureus rebuffed.

It was when Argent launched herself at Aureus, that Tygra stepped out of the way, and into the room with the glass box.

The panel closed, plunging him into darkness. From the other side of the wall he heard the clatter of metal upon metal as the robots fought, then silence.

The tiger listened carefully, but heard nothing more. "Perhaps they have neutralized each other, he said softly, finally entertaining the thought that they would not follow him. He moved slightly away from the spot where he had crossed into the room. He touched the smooth metal wall, and heard a soft hum. "Damn!" he snarled.

One by one lights illuminated the wall panels which had become transparent. The wonderfully dressed people, whose vanity had forever trapped them in the glass cases, looked back at him with horror. Their was nothing he could do for those who had been preserved by Aureus and Argent. Sidling cautiously away, Tygra approached the lone door, and prayed it would lead him out, and away from the starring eyes filled with regret. Thankfully it slid open to reveal a long, shadowy corridor. At its end there appeared to be yet another portal. "Now that you know there is real danger, Tygra. Take care," he advised himself.

The Thundercat stepped onto the new path. Iridescence suffused the walls. Shadowy figures swam past in the sea of color. The fur on the back of his neck rose in fear. Only the possibility of an escape route at the end of the hallway offered a salve to the terror that grew in his heart.

Tygra took a deep breath. "Protect me," he said to any god that would listen. As he moved forward it seemed to him that the air grew heavier, and impeded his movement. Aromas assailed his senses. He realized just how hungry he had become as obese shadows clustered around him, and offered an unending feast. "No!" he roared rejecting their torment as his hunger intensified to a painful level.

A war cry came from a new figure who brandished a scimitar, summoning him into a fight. "Leave me be!" he shouted, guessing that unless he touched the wall, the shadows could not defeat him.

Worse than the shadows were the whispers that suddenly surrounded him, evil sprites free of the confines of the walls.

"You should be the Lord of the Thundercats, not that young fool," one voice insisted.

"You will never reach the door!" another challenged, then cackled in the disheartening cadence he had associated with evil beings such as Mumm-Ra the Ever-Living.

Tygra put his hands to his ears to block the unceasing taunts that threatened to stir up envy and despair in his soul, but the malevolent murmurs took up residence in his tired brain. "Truth! Justice! Honor! Loyalty!" Tygra screamed to silence them.

But his respite was short-lived. Harsh, clanging bells now sounded repeatedly. The shadows transformed into strange shapes which arranged themselves in an infinite number of disorienting patterns. A metal box with a handle floated before him. "Pull and win a fortune!" a disembodied voice declared.

"I require little wealth!" Tygra bellowed. Groaning with effort as the atmospheric pressure increased to levels he was convinced would crush him, the tiger pushed past the device. He shook with disgust as he marked the gleaming skull that formed the knob of the handle, its jaws clacking in rebuke.

Unexpectedly the corridor plunged into darkness and silence. Tygra stopped. He could see nothing, but he trusted that the door still lay just a few feet before him. "I...must...keep...going," he gasped.

He took another step, and there she stood radiating white light. As tall as he, the beautiful Thunderan tigress garbed in folds of yellow silk opened her inviting arms wide. A stirring he had not known since his homeworld's destruction made itself known to him.

"Our race is at an end. Spend your last days with me in memory of all you have lost," she whispered, her brown eyes reflecting back his growing ardor.

Only with his permission could he end his suffering, and release all that he had held back since the destruction of his people and their world. No concern for his king or his companions could match his unquenchable desire for the tigress.

He sighed at the sheer absurdity of life. "I have come too far to lose myself in my own illusion," he said in a deep voice strengthened with enlightenment and sacrifice.

The tigress bowed, then dissipated into wisps of blue light. His desire returned to its imprisonment. In the darkness, the door opened. Tygra stumbled into a moonlit chamber

crammed with vehicles. He laid himself down upon the cool floor. He marked the heavens through the clear dome above him. For a while he calmly watched the slowly moving river of stars as his pondered his dire situation.

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He must have fallen asleep. The Thundercat was unsure whether he had heard the soft breathing or the gentle footfalls first. Tygra sprang to his feet, but stepped back in astonishment.

The human girl before him was thin, small, and about the same age as his young twin charges, Wilykit and Wilykat. She wore a blue shirt with long sleeves and an oddly rolled collar. That her trousers as well as her shoes and socks were also blue would have made the fussy Aureus squirm. Her black hair was pulled back and held in place by a silver clip shaped like a running horse. Her large, dark brown eyes regarded him seriously. "You are the only one to have made it through the Casino."

"Casino?" Tygra said, trying out the strange word.

"The Storm brought you here. It happens once a year."

Despite the youth of his host, Tygra growled, "Was my plight entertainment for you!"

The child's eyes widened in shock. "I had no part in your trials." She pointed to a large black screen built into the wall. "I viewed everything that happened to you. I did my best to assist you, but the Yellow Box is a formidable adversary. I finally managed to provide the portals that brought you to this room, and safety."

"I am sorry for blaming you," Tygra said, his face heating with shame.

"The Storm and The Emperor's Palace Casino are all that remain of the Day of Disaster that happened here in Las Vegas. Both still claim victims," she added sadly. The girl indicated the great bay window that overlooked a barren landscape. "Beyond is the Yellow Box. It is behind the Parking Lot. If you can destroy that, you can stop the Storm and deactivate all the malfunctions of the Casino."

She wants the current danger ended. That is a good sign, he thought. "So, this was not always a place of evil?"

"No. Many came to Las Vegas for fun, adventure and to fulfill all manner of fantasy. The Disturbance inadvertently created by the visiting physicists vaporized all living things for miles around during the Disaster. Its remnant is the dimensional Storm. Only buildings remained from that day, but one by one the desert reclaimed them. The Emperor's Palace Casino was built differently from the other structures because of new technology. It has survived the centuries."

"Centuries! By Jaga's blood!" Tygra exclaimed, amazed at the tale.

And this girl is...what? Another robot? he wondered, marvelling at how completely the mysterious child represented a human. The tiger ran his hand nervously through his mane, unsure of how to proceed. He looked around the chamber at the strange vehicles. "Do any of these still run?" he asked, hoping against the impossibility after centuries of neglect.

The girl pointed to one next to the window. She whistled. A strategically placed light cast the vehicle in a radiant oval. "Refurbished, classic, turquoise, 57 Chevy convertible with V-8 engine modified to run with Crystal 2955 Power Block and a BOOM A.I. System. This car was the best in the automotive show."

Tygra eyes darted from girl to car and back again. "But what are you?"

"The past."

He had to force the word from his throat. "A spirit?"

"Yes and no."

"More riddles!" Tygra exclaimed, his frustration growing. But I must keep her talking. She may be my only way home, he thought, regretting his impulsive outburst. "Explain," he demanded too harshly.

She touched his hand and his mind erupted with images.

A toddler ambled over a meadow brimming with flowers, and into the arms of a tall man. The girl tugged at his wheat blonde hair playfully. His green eyes brightened with amusement. "Shall we go for a ride in the 57, Genevieve?" he asked playfully.

The girl nodded vigorously. "Let's Daddy!"

The sunny day changed to a stormy afternoon. The child had become an adolescent. She stood by a chain-link fence, her hands gripping the metal. Beyond her reach a broken 57 Chevy rested amidst other vehicles that would never run again. "Damn my cousin for your death!" she cried to the wind. "I would have cared for you, my friend. Why couldn't Daddy wait to give you to me!"

Tygra was suddenly back in the chamber. Lively people inspecting the vehicles brushed by him without noticing him. Music played. The big screen chaotically shifted the images it displayed. The atmosphere was clearly festive. The 57 Chevy drew his attention as his viewpoint shifted.

Tygra suddenly found himself sitting in the vehicle next to a old woman. A silver horse clip reined in her long white hair. A beatific smile removed years from her advanced age. "Long have I waited to see you again my dear old friend," she said to the 57 Chevy in a voice warm with remembrance. As she reached for the key in the ignition, the chamber flooded with light.

"No!" Tygra shouted, knowing that in that instant so long ago, everyone had died.

The vision ended. The child look back at him, her small, warm hand clasping his. "I am not she," she said before he could frame the question. "Although the new engine has never turned, the crystals have always radiated energy to protect the 57 Chevy through its A.I."

"And that is you."

"Yes. With her death, Genevieve's memories sparked me to a level of awareness my designer never intended. Alone, I had time to experiment with my reality. I finally mastered the crystals' power to project a transitory form. This allowed me to manipulate the Screen and observe the image record of what happened on the Day of Disaster. Since then, I have attempted to help those brought here by the Storm by creating a Safe Zone, but you are the only one who has survived."

"Incredible!" Tygra said. Her pulse quickened under his fingers. "You feel quite real to me."

The girl released his hand. "Your belief in me strengthens me. Do you understand?"

"Quite well, little one," Tygra said, impressed by a girl who was little more than one of his illusions. He laughed at the irony, yet his mirth was short-lived. He was no closer to finding a way home.

The big screen activated, and displayed a map of the continents of Third Earth. A yellow line connected one location to another. "You are a long way from your home," the girl said.

Tygra put his hand to his mouth in disbelief. The Storm had carried him halfway across world. "How will I ever be able to contact--" His voice faltered with the reality before him: he would have no way to return on his own to Cats' Lair.

He felt the warm touch again. "An active satellite remains in Earth orbit. You can use the panel under the Screen to send a signal. I will guide you."

Tygra knelt before the girl who really was not there. He clasped her hands. Although she was not the spirit of the woman who had died, she was her legacy. "Thank you, Genevieve," he said, bestowing upon her a most fitting name.

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Morning had finally arrived, then aged into late afternoon. To his immense relief, Tygra watched the Feliner descend, its landing jets kicking up a cloud of desert dust.

The Thundercat activated the control board set near the window. The panels that held the glass folded neatly in sequence, opening the chamber to the world beyond and the stifling heat. Tygra turned to the girl. "Time to go, Genevieve. Get inside, and guide me."

Seated beside the Thundercat, the girl explained the operation of the vehicle. "Shall we go?" Tygra asked brightly as he saw Panthro wave in the distance.

"Yes, it is time," Genevieve answered calmly.

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In the years that had passed he always wondered why he did not sense the finality in her statement. As he turned the engine over, she had disappeared.

Despite his loss, he had somehow managed that day to kept his focus and his promise. The lasers canons on the Feliner annihilated the Yellow Box. He knew that somewhere inside the warren that had been the Emperor's Palace Casino, the robots had become as lifeless as those they had trapped, and the Storm had finally ended.

Panthro had appreciated not only the beauty of the 57 Chevy, but had marveled at its excellent A.I. system. "You always said she was the smartest vehicle on Third Earth, and you never knew how right you were, Panthro," Tygra said wistfully. "Genevieve was my friend. I always felt her presence in the car with me. She heard many of my secrets and sorrows."

The ancient Thundercat picked up the black and white photograph that Panthro had taken so long ago. His younger self stood next to the car dressed in the strange garb that had documented his adventure. His casual pose disguised his profound relief at being home. "You fit together," Panthro had said. "She's your vehicle, Tygra, and I have to say, I am more than a little envious."

"Panthro, I never thanked you enough for maintaining Genevieve. It is because of you my friend that she has run so well for so long." The architect looked out the window of his house at a city bustling with Thunderans who had miraculously survived their world's destruction. The phantom temptress from his subconscious had been wrong. Life, not death, had won in the end, and that was a story always worth telling his grandcubs. "I wish you were here to see all of this, Panthro."

"He knows."

The tiger had reached old age since he last heard the girl's voice. "Genevieve," he said with affection.

The girl touched his hand. "It is time."

Tygra's heart opened wide with love. "For one last drive."