Chapter 10 of *Signal in the Sky*

Pray
By Purrsia Kat

Snarf wheeled the serving cart into the dining hall and Felina still had yet to show for dinner. Lion-O's brow furrowed as he pondered what could be keeping the lioness. He studied the old Snarf. The poor creature moved like a zombie as he placed each hot, steaming dish he'd prepared onto the banquet table. Lion-O knew Snarf was suffering from the stress of the past few days. Yet the loyal snarf insisted on pressing on with his usual duties about the Lair, in addition to playing nurse to Panthro and the Mutant pup. Therefore, Lion-O figured he'd catch heat from Snarf for what he was about to do.

"I want you all to start dinner without me. I'm going to see what's keeping Felina," Lion-O announced, rising from his chair.

As predicted, Snarf began to pout. "Aw gee, Lion-O. I didn't push myself to the brink of exhaustion to have you let your supper get cold, sneeeyarf!"

"Now, Snarf, it's not the end of the world. He'll be back before you know it," Tygra assured him. "Just relax, ok?"

"Hmmph. You wouldn't have such a rosy attitude if *you* were the one who slaved over the stove," Lion-O heard Snarf complain while leaving the dining hall.

He knocked on the door of Felina's bedchamber, where they'd left her to dress for dinner. His apprehension grew when nobody replied. He tried to think of a million reasons why she would be slow to respond. Finally, his intuition won out, and Lion-O entered her room without her permission.

Scanning the chamber, he could tell she had indeed changed clothes, yet Felina was nowhere to be seen. Then he noticed her cloak, as well as her bow and arrows, were missing. But what disturbed him more than what was missing was what she left behind. The Book of Omens remained in its customary spot atop her desk. Lion-O deduced something sudden must have caused Felina to leave in such a hurry that she left the Book behind.

"Where would she run off to this late in the evening without telling anyone? I knew she wasn't acting right when she awoke from that dream," Lion-O thought while racing to the Sword chamber. So wrapped up in his thought, Lion-O nearly tripped over Bela who emerged into the corridor from the council chamber.

"Lion-O!" Bela exclaimed, barely sidestepping out of his way. "Have you seen Felina?"

"No," he answered shortly. "I don't think she's in the Lair. Go back and tell the others I'm going out to look for her."



Felina pulled the cloak tightly around her, guarding against the chill in the night air. A brisk breeze rocked the treetops as she made her way through the forest. All she could think about was getting to the Key of Thundera while that strange psychic dream was still fresh in her mind. She trotted along the path in a half-run. She hoped to quickly reach the Balkan Bar and find someone there who could tell her where a chasm like the one in her dream is located.

Felina was so focused on her mission, she failed to notice when four shadowy figures closed in on her. Before the lioness could react, one of them roughly grabbed her by the wrist, pulling her toward him. In the pale moonlight, Felina could tell her assailant was a Trollog.

"Unhand me!" she demanded, kicking at the stout, troll-like creature.

"Pretty cat woman will fetch much money when sold into the slavery," came a husky voice from behind her.

Felina twisted around to see the portly, swine-like being who spoke. The moonlight reflected off a huge, jeweled ring upon one of his pudgy fingers, as he batted the oversized feather in his cap away from his face. Felina finally broke free of the Trollog's grip. She back-peddled to avoid the swine in addition to two more Trollogs on either side of him.

Felina didn't like the odds against her. She stared at her attackers while her mind worked fast on a decision of what to do next. Knowing it would take too much time to try to prepare a shot with her bow, Felina decided to make a run for it. At the instant she took off, one of the Trollogs leapt at her. He managed to catch hold of her flowing cloak. Felina heard the sound of her cloak ripping from her body before she fell to the ground. The lioness tried to will herself to spring to her feet and run. But the fall had winded her too badly. She braced herself to be overrun by the creatures.

Suddenly, a familiar voice echoed down the narrow forest path. "Stop right there." Felina would've heaved a sigh of relief if she had the breath left in her lungs to do so. She turned her head to see Lion-O glaring at the Trollogs, his Sword poised for attack. The Trollogs had had enough run-ins with the Lord of the ThunderCats to know they didn't care for the sting of his mighty Sword. They scattered in all directions without putting up a fight.

"What in the cat's eyed cosmos are you doing out here, Felina?" Lion-O demanded as he extended a hand to the lioness.

She avoided his scrutinizing stare by looking down the moonlit path. Ignoring his question, Felina said, "How did you find me way out here?"

Holding up the Sword of Omens, Lion-O answered curtly, "Second Sight. But you still haven't answered me."

A particularly strong gust of northern wind blasted through the forest, forcing Felina to fully realize she was without the protection of her cloak. "No matter. I can't let anything stop me from getting to that Key as quickly as possible," she silently vowed. Without acknowledging Lion-O, she started down the path.

Grasping her by the arm, Lion-O pressed her for answers. "What is with you, Felina? It's crazy for you to be wandering around in the woods at night." Taking on a gentler tone, he added, "Why don't you come on back to the Lair and rest. I think you're still shell shocked from that last bout with the Mutants."

Lion-O was taken aback when Felina angrily broke from his grasp. "I'm completely fine, thank you very little." Felina's anger left her as quickly as it had flared. She flushed slightly, aware of the shameful way in which she had just spoken to the Lord of the ThunderCats. "Forgive me, my lord. It's just...that dream still weighs heavily on my mind."

“I knew you were more concerned than you let on about that,” Lion-O confessed. “That’s all the more reason you should return to the Lair tonight.”

Felina tried to be as polite as she could muster. “I’m sorry, but I must go against your wishes. I feel a dire need to seek out the Key of Thundera. In my dream, I saw where it’s located.”

Lion-O studied her closely for a long moment before speaking. “Do you really think you’ll gain much ground tonight? It would be wiser to wait until morning when the woods aren’t teeming with Trollogs and greedy Tabbots.”

“You waste your breath, lord,” Felina insisted, turning on her heel. “I’m going, and I’m going tonight.”

His patience with his young wife at its end, Lion-O followed after her, speaking sternly, “As Lord of the ThunderCats, and even more importantly, as your husband, I’m ordering you to return home with me. Now. Tonight.”

Felina stopped and turned to face Lion-O. Her expression changed from confused, to hurt, and finally, to angry. “I cannot believe you just said that. How dare you pull rank on me for something like this. You’re not even listening to me. I have to do this now. It can’t wait. The dream is so vivid in my mind right now I can’t focus on anything else.”

“Felina, I--” Lion-O started.

“And as for speaking of being my husband, I find that nearly laughable, as it seems you have such a title in name only,” Felina declared before running down the path. She felt a tinge of regret for referring to their lack of intimacy at such a moment of anger, but there was no other way to get him to leave her alone. She was relatively sure he wouldn’t have the audacity to physically force her to his will. She would just have to deal with the consequences of openly defying the Lord of the ThunderCats when she returned.



Cheetara entered the room where Panthro was recovering from his wounds. The cheetah volunteered to relieve Snarf of his evening nursing duties, mainly because he was too worried about Lion-O searching the woods for Felina to be of much help. She made her way to Panthro’s bedside, where the burly warrior lay in an anesthetic induced slumber. While she checked his IV bags, Cheetara was surprised to see Panthro stir and open his eyes.

“Panthro!” Cheetara exclaimed, leaning over her ailing friend. “How are you feeling?”

Panthro merely grumbled and blinked several times, as if trying to comprehend where he was and what had happened. Finally, his eyes found Cheetara’s concerned face. “Cheetara...” he managed weakly, “what happened?” Before she could answer, his eyes widened with sudden realization. “My Thunder Tank! Those blasted Mutants stole my Tank!”

Panthro fought to push himself into a sitting position. Cheetara pressed against his broad chest, forcing him to lie back down. “The Tank is just fine compared to the condition you’re in. Now just lie down and rest. We’ll take care of any maintenance that needs to be done to the Tank,” she assured him.

“Like hell you will!” retorted Panthro, the intensity of his anger seeming to provide him with

renewed strength. “Now let me up, woman. *I* will repair *my* Tank and then I have a score to settle with the Mutants!”

As he attempted to yank the IV’s from his arm, Cheetara roughly took him by the forearm. She had wanted to be more delicate about breaking the bad news, but he left her little choice. “You’re not going anywhere until Tygra fashions a prosthetic leg for you. Now lie down, dammit!”

“My leg? What--” Panthro looked at Cheetara as though she were insane. “You’ve got me confused with some other wounded soldier...I can still feel both my legs.”

Cheetara suspected Panthro was experiencing what was known as the phantom limb sensation, in which the nerves in an amputees’ damaged limb sends false messages to the brain, causing the afflicted person to feel as though the missing limb is still there. Tygra had warned her that Panthro may likewise experience this phenomenon. She could hardly bear Panthro’s shocked expression when he whipped the blankets back and gaped at his maimed body.

“Great holy Jaga.....how?” asked a stunned Panthro.

“It--it was the Mutants -- when they were in the Tank. They fired the cannons at me, but the shot went wild and...and hit you,” she explained. Cheetara tried hard not to look upon him with pity, knowing Panthro was the last cat who would be receptive to such an emotion.

It took him a moment to absorb what she had told him. “Not only do those bastards take my leg off, but they do it with my own gun!” he seethed through gritted teeth.

Before Cheetara could react, Panthro rolled off the bed. His IVs ripped from his flesh as he tumbled to the floor. Not letting the fall phase him, Panthro began to army crawl his way toward the door. Cheetara raced around the bed to stop him just as Tygra entered the room.

“What in blazes?!” Tygra bellowed upon entering. “Cheetara, what’s gotten into him?”

“He’s hell bent on getting back at the Mutants,” she called out, while trying in vain to subdue the determined panther. “Help me get him back in bed!”

Tygra nodded and headed to a stand of cabinets against the wall. “I’ve got just the thing to tame an overzealous but wounded panther.”

Still fighting off Cheetara’s advances, Panthro’s eyes narrowed. “You even think of sedating me, tiger, and you’ll be the first on my shit list when I wake up!”

Ignoring the threat, Tygra approached his struggling comrade, needle in hand. “Believe me, you’ll thank me for this someday.”

Despite Panthro’s writhing in protest, Tygra managed to stick him with the needle. The powerful sedative took only minutes to work its magic, with Panthro growling and cursing the entire time. Once Panthro finally returned to the realm of the unconscious, Tygra and Cheetara easily lifted him back into bed.

“Well,” Tygra said while hooking the IVs back up, “he actually took the news better than I thought.”

Cheetara laughed. “Really? And just what would’ve been a bad reaction?”

“At least he didn’t sit around feeling sorry for himself. It’s just like ole Panthro to want to get up and knock the Mutants’ heads together,” reflected Tygra. “If he hadn’t shown his temper, I would’ve been more worried, believe it or not.”

“I never thought of it that way,” Cheetara admitted. “Hopefully, our cub won’t have such a volatile temper. One hothead per Lair is the quota I believe.”

It took Tygra a second to comprehend what Cheetara’s comments meant. “Are you saying--?”

A sly smile on her lips, she simply nodded. He scooped her up in his arms and spun around.

“This is just--just wonderful!” Tygra exclaimed blissfully. “How long have you known?”

“I’ve suspected a pregnancy for a few weeks now. I just didn’t want to say anything until I knew for sure,” she replied. “But I want to wait to tell the others until after some of the excitement dies down around here, ok?”

Tygra nestled his face into her neck. “Whatever you wish, my love!”



Felina burst through the door of the Balkan Bar. She became instantly aware of the somber mood in air. There were only a few forlorn Wolos clustered at a table in the corner of the usually bustling place. A mournful folk tune played on the jukebox, the singer lamenting about abandoning the farm life for the city. Not a single Wolo looked up when Felina entered, preferring to stare through the bottoms of their shot glasses instead. Felina had the feeling they were trying desperately to exorcise their demons, using alcohol as the holy water with which they hoped to cleanse their souls.

Figuring she wouldn’t get far with that crowd, Felina approached the old Balkan bartender.

He glanced up, looking mildly surprised to see the feline by herself. “What’ll it be, miss?” he croaked.

“Well, Tague, I was going to ask your patrons for some information, but they don’t look like they’re in very high spirits,” Felina said.

Stroking his white beard, he nodded. “Got an early frost last night. The earliest the frost has come that anyone can remember. They’re set to lose most of their crops, the poor bastards. But perhaps old Tague will have an answer for you...”

Felina pried her mind away from the unfortunate Wolo farmers’ plight. She came here on a mission, and she intended to finish it. “Yes. I was wondering if you knew where there exists a deep fissure or chasm, one that seems to emit some kind of electro-magnetic energy from within. It appeared to be in a most treacherous landscape...”

“Mmmm. Sounds as though you speak of the Bottomless Chasm. That would be at least a day’s trek to the west of here,” replied Tague.

Felina couldn’t help but feel disappointed. It bothered her to know the trip could’ve indeed been faster if made on the morrow in the Thunder Tank. The information only made her feel more like a fool for being insubordinate to her husband. While pondering whether to humbly return to the Lair or venture on alone, the smell of cooking beef wafted in from the bar’s kitchen. The enticing aroma reminded her that she hadn’t eaten a thing since the previous afternoon.

“Thank you for the information. And I wouldn’t mind having a helping of whatever’s cooking back there. It smells delicious!”

She took a seat at a nearby table to wait for her food. The lioness closed her eyes, searching for a moment of peace, when Lion-O’s voice jarred her back to reality. “Mind if I have a seat?”

“Have anything you like...you *are* lord,” she replied archly.

Ignoring the barb, Lion-O seated himself across from her. “So, where are you headed?”

Felina didn’t want to tell him where she was really going and considered lying about the location. However, she quickly settled on the truth. She would just have to handle his ‘I told you so’ remarks. “To the Bottomless Chasm, apparently. Just pausing for a bite to eat is all.”

“That’s quite a way from here,” he remarked without any detectable mockery in his voice. “I

took the liberty of calling in to the Lair to let them know we wouldn't be returning tonight. I'd like to accompany you on your mission. That is, if the Lady of the ThunderCats will allow it."

Felina wondered why he would have such a change of heart. "Lady, huh? I wasn't aware I held such a title."

"I'll take that as a yes," Lion-O responded. "I also thought, while we're on this little trip, you might teach me some of the language in which the Book of Omens is written."

"You mean the language of Tarceri arga Upoquegiscarius?"

"Moons of Thundera! If that's what I'm in for, maybe I don't want to learn it," Lion-O joked.

Felina smiled. "Actually, it's not as bad as all that. The ancients just had a sense of humor. That phrase roughly translates into 'cat's got your tongue.'" The pair shared a good laugh before Felina continued. "The language as a whole is much simpler. Even the grammar and syntax are nearly identical to what we already speak. It's really just a faux language invented by the ancients as a way to speak in code."

"Sense of humor notwithstanding, I'm going to stick to referring to the language as 'Thunderian'," Lion-O remarked.

Tague appeared with a large platter of food. Felina gaped at the smorgasbord of meats, breads and cheeses, as he set the tray before her. "Mountains of Thundera! I'm hungry, but I can't eat all this!" Looking over at Lion-O she continued, "I hope you brought your appetite."

"No problem," he assured her. "I took off before eating as well."

Tague took a pencil from its perch behind his ear and did some quick calculations on the pad of paper he held. "That comes to 12 Balkan dollars, with the flask of wine being complimentary of course."

Felina's embarrassment grew as she searched in vain for any money that she might have stashed in her quiver. "Would you believe I left in such a hurry, I haven't any money?"

"I can believe it," Lion-O replied with a laugh. "Impetuousness must be something we lions are cursed with." Lion-O removed a small pouch from his belt. "Do you take Berbil dollars?"

"Most certainly," replied Tague. "Factoring in the exchange rate, you owe 9 Berbil dollars."

With the issue of payment taken care of, the pair ate and drank their fill.



It was nearly midnight when they set out from the bar. Lion-O noticed the temperature had dropped considerably; so much so that each exhale was a visible cloud of vapor.

"Here," he offered Felina as they strode down the path. "Take my cloak."

Felina stopped him before he could remove the garment. "Really, I'm fine. It's not that bad. But it is unusually chilly for this time of year, given the few weeks of summer season yet remain."

Noting her ruddy cheeks, he suspected the warming effects of the wine for her tolerance of the cold. "I'm thinking we should stop up ahead. There's a clearing off the path where we can build a fire and make camp for the night."

Felina begrudgingly agreed. They soon reached the clearing that opened up amid a stand of pine trees. While Lion-O built a fire, Felina pushed pine needles into a pile for a makeshift bed.

Nestling into the fluffy needles, the combination of wine and warmth of the fire soon sent Felina into a deep sleep. Sitting against a boulder, Lion-O stayed awake a bit longer. He stared at the stars in the clear sky until he could no longer hold his eyes open.

The hard stone did not make for a comfortable bed, and Lion-O awoke a few hours later. The campfire was nothing but glowing coals and the chill in the air was more pronounced than ever. Forcing his stiff joints to cooperate, Lion-O rose and tossed a few more logs on the fire. By the revived fire's soft glow, he spotted the slumbering Felina, curled in a fetal position and visibly shivering. Knowing the fire alone wouldn't be sufficient to warm her, Lion-O lay next to her and covered them both with his cloak. Instinctively, Felina snuggled into his broad chest. She continued shivering for several minutes before finally his body heat began to warm her. A smile spread across Lion-O's face when he detected a soft purring coming from the lioness. They slumbered peacefully together the remainder of the night.



Jax opened his eyes, squinting against the first bright rays of sunrise. Once his eyes adjusted, the young Mutant was shocked at his surroundings. He could tell he wasn't within any Mutant stronghold. Everything was far too clean and neat for that. His heart skipped a beat when he saw the feared ThunderCat insignia stamped on a crate across the room. His mind slowly cleared and he started to remember what happened.

He had stowed away on a Mutant starship, desperate to escape the neglect and abuse doled out by the various adult Mutants that came in and out of his life. Somehow, that ship had gotten teleported to this strange planet. Luckily, he escaped before the soldiers of the ship, led by a Thunderian, began their assault on the inhabitants of this world. He had wandered the wilderness for days, maybe weeks, surviving off of bark and leaves mostly. Then he ventured into a desert and fell down through the sands into some kind of secret base. Though Jax had quickly discerned that it was a Mutant base, he laid low.

Then as the base literally began to fall apart around him, the feline woman offered to help him escape. He had been raised not to trust any Thunderians, but a ThunderCat, such as this woman was, was to be loathed above all others. His guard up the entire time. Though he accepted her aid, he planned on running as soon as they reached the desert floor. However, just as they surfaced, the blast sent them both sprawling through the air. Slamming against a sandstone boulder was the last thing Jax remembered.

He vaguely wondered how long he had been in the ThunderCats' custody and what bizarre experiments they might have performed on his body while he was out. "I need to get out of here," he thought, scanning the room for the most inconspicuous way to exit. Sitting up quickly in bed was a mistake, however. His head swam and throbbed with pain. Just when he feared he may black out, someone entering the chamber snapped him out of it.

Forcing his eyes to focus, Jax's startled when he beheld not one, but two young ThunderCats at his bedside. "Hey, you're finally awake," he heard the female say. "How are you feeling?"

Making an effort not to show his fear, Jax simply glared at the kittens.

"Er...uh, maybe we should get Tygra in here to check him out," suggested the male feline.

"Good idea," agreed the girl. "I'll be right back."

After she left, the boy turned to Jax. “Hi. I’m WilyKat.” He extended his hand to Jax. “That was my sister, WilyKit. But you can just call us Kat and Kit for short.”

Jax recoiled from the offer of a handshake. His lip curled into a snarl and he emitted a low growl of warning. WilyKat awkwardly lowered his hand.

“Well, uh, I don’t suppose you know how to play Snarf Ball,” WilyKat continued. “What games do you know how to play?”

This kitten’s doomed efforts to make small talk were beginning to irritate Jax. “Drown the kitten,” he croaked in reply, “You toss a cat in a bag and throw him in the river. It’s great fun.”

“Can’t say I know that, uh, game,” WilyKat said, eyeing the pup curiously.

Tygra entered the room, with WilyKit close on his heels.

“Well, I see our little patient is up and alert,” Tygra said warmly.

Jax’s brave facade eroded. He as if he was being ganged up on by the three cats. Jax put his hands up defensively and yipped when Tygra approached him with a pen light.

“There there,” Tygra soothed, “I’m not going to hurt you. I just want to check your eyes with this light so I can assess your head injury.”

“It’s a trick!” Jax thought as he scrambled back to the head of the bed. His struggling soon overwhelmed him, and he slipped back into unconsciousness.



It took a moment for the lingering grogginess of sleep to wear off before Felina remembered where she was. Pushing the cloak back, she propped herself on one elbow and squinted at the misty countryside. The sun had already burned most of the fog away. Felina found it amazing she slept so late considering the hard earth made for a most uncomfortable bed. Upon taking inventory of the campsite, she noted both Lion-O and her bow and quiver were gone. Felina frowned as she got up. Walking over to the smoking remnants of the fire, she noticed a note nearby, anchored by a rock. The message was penned by Lion-O, explaining that he took her bow on a hunting mission and would return to the site soon. She grinned when she saw he’d signed off with the Thunderian word she’d taught him for ‘goodbye’.

“He may turn out to be a good student yet,” she mused.

Detecting the sound of rushing water nearby, Felina decided to wash up before he returned. She could hardly wait to cleanse herself of the sappy pine needles that stuck to her from head to toe. Felina only had to travel a few yards into the woods to reach the river. She guessed it must be a tributary to the main River that ran nearer to the Lair. The air was still a bit on the chilly side. Felina was relieved to feel the water was actually lukewarm after she tentatively stuck her toes in. Shucking her dress, Felina waded into the river and headed to the waterfall that was just upstream. Felina stood under the cascading waters. Submerged almost waist deep, the water truly felt refreshing as it rushed over her nude body. Just when she was about to douse her head, movement caught her eye form where the river bends downstream. Felina couldn’t hear anything above the din of the falling waters, but she swore she saw a figure dash back into the cover of the dark pine forest. Quickly, Felina took one good spin under the waterfall before wading back to

the shore and patting herself dry with the cloak. Her senses on heightened alert, she dressed and ran back toward camp and hoped Lion-O would already be there.



Lion-O used some twine to secure the pair of hares together he'd hunted and slung them over his back. When he reached the narrow river close to camp, he bent over to get a few handfuls of the thirst-quenching liquid. Glancing upriver, he saw Felina standing beneath the waterfall. He stared, fixed in his crouched position, unable to look away from the nude lioness. Not that he could see a whole lot, as she was up to her waist in the water and her back was mostly to him. When she turned to look his way, Lion-O lost his balance and landed with a splash into the water. Hoping she hadn't spotted him, he scrambled up the riverbank and back into the stand of pines.

Silently thanking Jaga he hadn't lost the hares, he ran farther up river before crossing. He reached camp before Felina and busied himself with stoking the campfire and preparing the hares. When he finally heard her approach, he tried to keep an air of nonchalance.

"Faris, Aulu enti Vedepa Tarcerii," Felina said by way of greeting.

Looking up from his work, he stared at her blankly. "Huh?"

"Well, how soon we forget our lessons. I said, 'Hello, Lord of the ThunderCats'," she replied with a giggle. "At least you remembered how to say goodbye."

Lion-O felt heat rising to his cheeks. "Oh, right." He tried to shrug off her scrutinizing stare.

"Anyway, I thought you might want to know...while I was bathing I think some creep was spying on me in the woods," she commented while casually wringing out her hair.

Lion-O's hand slipped while cutting the second hare open, causing him to drop the Sword. "Er, well, it was probably nothing. Your mind can get the best of you in the woods you know."

"Perhaps," Felina said slowly, her eyes narrowing as she regarded him. "But tell me, why is your backside soaked?"

"Oh, well..." He was completely flustered. "I--well...."

"I see." To his surprise, she broke into a hearty laugh. "I won't make you squirm anymore, although it was good fun."

"Felina, I didn't mean to--what I mean to say is--" Lion-O stammered.

"It's ok," she interrupted, "having you look upon me is better than some other creep ogling me."

"Uh, thanks...I guess." Desiring a change of topic, he continued, "Is the dream still as vivid in your mind today?"

"More so, I'm afraid," she replied, her mood turning somber. Felina gazed into the fire for several minutes. Lion-O waited patiently for her to go on. "I remember things that I wish never were revealed to me. I saw the ship Miss Katya was aboard explode on its launch pad. Until I had this dream, or vision, I'd always fancied she'd made it to our original destination; that she was out there somewhere, teaching again...perhaps raising a family..."

Putting the skinned and cleaned hares on a spit, Lion-O nodded. "That was a horrible sight to

see. We saw it too, from our ship. It's one of the images that still haunts me from that sad day. I'm sorry you too had to witness the death of your governess in order to find the Key of Thundera."

"So many of our countrymen died that day," Felina whispered, thinking also of Jagget and Ocelia, who she now knew did not survive the flight to Third Earth. She could only assume the same fate befell Bengali, Pumyra, and Lynx-O as well. "Do you think we few are the only ones who made it?"

"We may be the only Thunderians on Third Earth, but from certain things Jaga has mentioned when he appears to me, I think there are survivors elsewhere in the universe..." Lion-O replied.

"You know, I used to be so jealous of your relationship with my father," Felina confessed. "But the strangest thing about my dream was the part where I saw what happened as all of you boarded the flag ship and took off. Supposedly, the purpose of the dream was just to reveal where the Key landed. So why would I see that?"

Lion-O shrugged.

"I'll tell you why. It was father who appeared at the end of the dream and emphasized the Key. I think it was he who inspired the dream in the first place. So he wanted me to see him as he left Thundera thinking that I would perish with it. He wanted me to see that he truly did care for me," she concluded.

Lion-O looked at her in amazement. "You doubt your father loved you?"

"Sadly, yes," Felina sighed. "It sometimes seemed as though he wanted to have me near but something was forcing him to keep me at arm's length...it's--it's hard to describe."

"There did often seem like there was a great sadness about him," Lion-O agreed.

He could hardly bear it when she looked him in the eye, her own shimmering with tears. "The next time he appears to you, tell father that I understand and I love him too. It's shameful, but I don't think I'd ever told him that while he lived..."

"Of course," he assured her, "consider it done."

Lion-O was relieved to see her blink back the tears. He quickly steered the conversation elsewhere. "We best eat quickly and get moving. We have a long walk ahead of us."



Panthro was alert when Snarf came into the sick bay to check on him. The panther had his pillow stuffed behind his back to aid him into a sitting postion. His tray of food hadn't been touched.

"Panthro, you haven't eaten a bite of your food....you're not depressed, are you?" Snarf asked timidly.

"Depressed?" echoed Panthro, "The only thing that's got me depressed is being on this wretched liquid diet. I want to sink my teeth into a steak, dammit, not sip on broth."

"Until you're a full 48 hours post-surgery, you can't have any solids." Snarf recoiled a bit under the weight of Panthro's glare. "Don't look at me, they're Tygra's orders."

"Hmph! I may only have one foot left, but it's going straight up Tygra's ass as soon as I can get around. I'm still pissed at him for sedating me earlier. All that time I spent sleeping I coulda had a new leg built by now," he grumbled.

Snarf scowled. “Now Panthro, you best not talk of your friends like that. He’s only trying to help you. You should be grateful, sneeyarf, snarf.” Snarf pushed himself up with his tail so that he was nearly at eye level with Panthro.

“You know what would make me grateful, Snarf?”

“I’m almost afraid to ask,” admitted Snarf, “but go ahead.”

Panthro leaned toward Snarf as if he were about to share a great secret. “Go down to the hangar, and wheel my tool chest up to me.”

Panthro could tell by the way Snarf’s ears drooped that he was balking at the idea of pushing the heavy tool chest all that distance. “Rrrwl, gee Panthro, that’s a long way for ole Snarf to push such a burden...perhaps Kit and Kat would--”

“No, Snarf.” Panthro’s tone was firm. “I want you to do it. If you bring Kit and Kat in on it, word will get back to Tygra and he’d find some blasted medical reason why I can’t be working with my tools or something.”

“All right,” Snarf conceded, looking defeated. “But I’ll probably end up right next to you when I throw out my back, snarf snarf.”

Panthro rolled his eyes. “Enough melodrama, Snarf. Now be quick about it.”

As Snarf scampered out of the room, Panthro scanned the area for anything he could use with which to build a new leg.



As night fell, Lion-O knew they were nearing their destination due to the landscape gradually changing from lush forest to rocky desert. However, jagged flashes of lighting in the distance worried him. A storm was brewing, and it looked to be a violent one.

Glancing at Felina, Lion-O could clearly see she too was concerned about the weather. “Perhaps we should seek shelter over there,” he said, pointing to a small building ahead of them with its lights aglow.

Despite whatever concerns she had about the approaching storm, Felina still looked disappointed. “But, Lion-O, we’re so close.”

He nearly did a double take at hearing the sound of his name on Felina’s lips. This marked the first time since she had rejoined the ThunderCats that she casually addressed him. This was a sure sign that they were indeed bonding in the course of this joint excursion. Hearing her utter his name was such a small thing, but it had a striking effect on him nonetheless.

“Yes,” he agreed, after regaining his composure. “From what Tague told us, the chasm is perhaps less than an hour away. But it’s wiser to take cover and let the storm pass first.”

The wind picked up and the first drops of rain pelted the pair. He grabbed her hand and ran toward the building. They reached the porch just as the downpour began.

“We’re in luck,” Felina exclaimed when she read the sign above the door. “This is an inn.”

“Yes, but it’s run by Tabbots, and they can be very tough to deal with,” Lion-O warned.

Upon entering, Lion-O directed Felina to sit on the couch in the lobby. Sitting beside her, he eyed the rotund Tabbot behind the counter.

Felina gasped when she saw the Tabbot. “Tabbots? He’s like the swine-like creature who attacked me in the forest the other night. Are they all that vicious?”

“Most of them are harmless,” explained Lion-O, never taking his eyes off the Tabbot clerk. “But many are too greedy for their own good.”

Finally the portly clerk waddled over to the couple. “Welcome, feline guests.” He snorted before continuing. “I am Hef, owner of this fine establishment.”

Lion-O stood and took the Tabbot’s extended hand. “I am Lion-O, Lord of the ThunderCats, and this is my wife, Felina. We come here to seek reprieve from the storm.”

After snorting several times, Hef continued, “It’s predicted to be a very stormy night indeed. If you plan on staying here much longer, you’ll have to buy a room.”

“Fine,” Lion-O said. “How much?”

The swine eyed the change pouch hanging from Lion-O’s belt. “15 Balkan dollars.”

Lion-O suspected the crooked Tabbot was inflating the price based on how much money he figured was in the pouch. Lion-O was pleased to see he had that much in Berbil dollars. “Here’s 12 Berbil dollars. If you take into account the exchange rate, you’ll see we’re even.”

Hef scoffed at the bronze Berbil dollar coins in his hand. “Do you take me for a fool, boy? Any idiot knows I’d need 20 Berbil dollars to be equivalent to Balkan currency.”

Peering outside at the raging thunderstorm, Lion-O knew the Tabbot was trying to swindle him. He was tempted to give Hef the 20 dollars and be done with it, but he only had 3 more to offer. “You’ll have to settle for 15 Berbil dollars,” Lion-O said, with no attempt to veil his disgust. “It’s all we have.”

“Settle? Well, if you haven’t any more money, perhaps you have something of value to exchange to stay safe and dry,” hinted Hef, motioning to the Sword of Omens at Lion-O’s side.

“Of all the--” Lion-O exclaimed, barely able to fathom the nerve of the Tabbot.

“Auca carem!” Felina shouted, rising to her feet. Lion-O blocked her with his arm before she could advance on Hef.

Drawing the Sword and turning back to face Hef, Lion-O could tell the Tabbot was afraid. Gripping the stout Tabbot by his collar, Lion-O lifted him up so they were eye to eye. “Listen closely, Tabbot, because I’m only going to tell you once. You’ve already swindled us out of more money than you deserve. Now, unless you want to receive this Sword in a way that I guarantee will be most uncomfortable, you’ll show us to our room.”

He released Hef, who landed hard on his feet. The trembling Tabbot could hardly stop his nervous snorting long enough to say, “Y-y-yes, valued patrons, right this way.”

Following Hef down a dimly lit hallway, Lion-O whispered, “What did you say to him back there?”

Felina smiled. “Sorry, I often lapse into Thunderian under stress and the like. I called him a putrid swine. Not that he was even aware he was insulted, but it made me feel better.”

Lion-O chuckled. “I’ll have to remember that...auca carem was it?”

Felina nodded.

Hef fumbled with the room key. Pushing the door open, he regarded the couple. “H-here you are. Check out at your leisure,” he added with a shaky smile.

After passing Felina a lit pillar candle, Hef scurried down the hall as fast as his stubby legs would carry him. Felina walked around the old four posted bed and used her candle to light the others around the room. Once the tiny room was awash in candlelight, it was apparent that even at 10 Balkan dollars the price would have been outrageous. The bed and single arm chair in the corner were old and broken down. Even the mirror hung above the chest of drawers was cracked

and so dusty it reflected nothing.

Felina set her candle atop the chest of drawers and ran her finger across its wooden top. After sneezing from the stirred dust, she commented, “Snarf wouldn’t be able to resist accosting this place with a feather duster.”

Just then a deafening crack of thunder shook the building. “It’s getting bad out there,” noted Lion-O.

“So, do you think we’ll be in for the night?” wondered Felina.

“It’s looking that way. I better call in to the Lair and let them know we’ve been delayed,” answered Lion-O. Speaking into his wrist band communicator, Lion-O reached Cheetara on duty at the Lair.

“Good to hear from you, Lion-O,” Cheetara’s voice crackled over the tiny speaker. “How goes the quest?”

“Delayed by weather, unfortunately. We’re staying in the Tabbot Inn for the night. Have someone meet us at the Bottomless Chasm with the Tank tomorrow afternoon.”

“Tygra just finished up repairs on the Tank today, so we’ll be there,” Cheetara replied. “Oh, just thought you might want to know, Panthro and the Mutant pup have been alert and both are improving.”

“That is good news,” said Lion-O. “We’ll see you all tomorrow.”

“Okay, over and--” Cheetara’s voice became muffled, but Lion-O could still make out what she was saying. “What? Snarf, he’s fine, he’s just--okay, okay, you can talk to him.” Clearly, she said, “Snarf wants to talk to you.”

Grinning, Lion-O responded, “Put him on.”

“You’re out in a storm?! You’ll catch your death of cold in the rain, and...and, you didn’t take your canteen or any snacks, and--”

“Take it easy, Snarf,” Lion-O interrupted. “We’re inside, safe from the storm. Now stop worrying.”

Snarf could be heard scoffing. “Just remember, there are wild animals in the woods, and--”

“We know, Snarf. We ate a few of them today. Now good night,” Lion-O dismissed him with a laugh.

“Wait, Lion-O!” begged Snarf. “About the chasm, I just wanted to say, don’t get too close. They don’t call it the Bottomless Chasm to be funny--”

Felina was buckled over in laughter at this point, with Lion-O not far behind. Composing himself, Lion-O replied, “Yes, Snarf. I’ll keep that in mind. Now, goodbye.” Sitting next to Felina on the edge of the bed, Lion-O continued laughing. “Poor Cheetara. Right now she’s listening to Snarf’s ‘under-appreciation speech.’”

A rat passing by Felina’s feet startled her out of her mirth. Tucking both feet under her, she clung to Lion-O. “Ugh, did you see that? I’m not going to be able to sleep knowing rats are roaming around in here.”

“Well,” teased Lion-O. “If you don’t sleep then I don’t have to listen to you purr all night.”

Leaning back to look him squarely in the eye, she declared, “I *do not* purr in my sleep!”

“Oh, but you do,” he insisted.

Bouncing to the middle of the bed, Felina peeled back the coverlets. “Well if it bothers you that much, you can sleep in the chair,” she said, flinging one of the pillows at him.

The two engaged in playful wrestling, laughing until it hurt. Sprawled out on their backs, they lay staring at the ceiling while catching their breath.

“I haven’t laughed that hard since the last game of Snarf Ball we played on Thundera,” Felina

panted.

Between breaths, Lion-O agreed, “I know what you mean.”

Without warning, the foot of the bed gave way, sending Felina sliding onto the threadbare rug. Lion-O nearly landed on top of her. Noticing Felina’s cheeks begin to blush at their close contact, Lion-O quickly righted himself to a sitting position.

“I’m glad to see you’re finally enjoying yourself, Felina,” Lion-O said seriously.

Sitting up, Felina looked thoughtfully at the flame of a nearby candle. “Yes, I suppose I am feeling as though I might fit into the group yet.”

“You should never feel as if you don’t belong,” he replied gently. Looking at her in the soft candlelight, he pondered how such a beautiful and intelligent cat could be riddled with such insecurity. “If only you could see yourself through my eyes...” he thought.

She turned to look at him and appeared as though she were about to speak. Lion-O’s gaze was drawn to her lips and he suddenly wondered what it would be like to kiss her. He tentatively lifted a hand to caress her cheek. When she made no attempt to pull away, he gained more confidence. The emotion in Felina’s eyes was a combination of uncertainty and anticipation. It seemed to take an eternity to close the small distance between them. But, finally, after a few false starts, his lips gently brushed hers. Sensing his gesture was well received, Lion-O pulled her body tight against his, kissing her more deeply. Felina returned his kiss with equal passion, which encouraged him to explore the curves of her body with his hands. The longer they remained locked in such an embrace, the more overwhelmed he became with the urge to join with her. The sudden furiousness with which these feelings consumed him caught him off guard, but they were too strong to ignore. Shifting his body weight, Lion-O attempted to gently push Felina onto her back. He snapped out of his lustful daze when she broke off their kiss and pushed away from him.

Springing to her feet, Felina rounded the corner of the bed and proceeded to assess its damaged end. “Help me fix this,” she muttered, without meeting his gaze.

Lion-O was incredulous that Felina appeared to shrug off the intimate moment they just shared. Keeping his eyes on her, he helped her right the foot of the bed and secure it.

“Goodnight,” she said dismissively. She quickly slid off her boots and got into bed.

Climbing in bed beside her, Lion-O lay propped on one elbow, regarding her curiously. “Felina, look at me.” When she made no effort to turn her head in his direction, he gently cupped her chin in his hand.

He couldn’t decipher what emotions were brimming behind her green eyes. “What’s wrong?”

Her mouth opened as if she would speak, but quickly snapped shut.

“I’m sorry if I was too forward with you. But you have to know, I’d never force you to...well, you know, I’d never think to--” Lion-O struggled for the right words.

“I know you wouldn’t,” Felina finally spoke. “I...I just got scared I guess...”

Gathering her close to him, Lion-O stroked her hair. “Let’s just get some sleep. We need to head out at first light.”

“Mmmm. Goodnight, Lion-O,” she murmured.

It didn’t take long for her breathing to become shallow and even, telling Lion-O the lioness slept peacefully. Lion-O, however, remained awake. He watched several candles burn out, the storm still raging on outside. He pondered the new feelings he had for Felina --whether they were feelings of love or lust, he wasn’t sure-- and how they would change the course of his life and the destiny of the ThunderCats.



Felina braced herself, as another blast of cosmic rays rumbled their way out of the Bottomless Chasm. “They seem to come at 30 second intervals,” she noted.

Felina had been extremely upset when she arrived at the outcropping of boulders on the chasm’s edge to find the Key had been washed away by the torrential rains. By the rutted pattern of the eroded soil, it was clear the Key had fallen into the chasm. She refused to give up hope for a miracle, and after an exhaustive search, she spied a shiny object lying on a bluff within the chasm. It was impossible to know for sure if the object was indeed the Key of Thundera, as the Sword of Omens’ powers of Second Sight would not work within the magnetic field surrounding the chasm.

“I’m not sure it’s worth risking our lives to grapple down there for something that may not be the Key at all,” cautioned Lion-O. “We should wait until Cheetara gets here in the Tank. Her sixth sense might be able to tell us for sure if that’s the Key.”

Felina would agree with his sensible plan ordinarily. But she had noticed with each cosmic blast, whatever was down there was being shaken closer to the edge of the bluff. She waited until Lion-O had his attention focused elsewhere before drawing her bow. She fired off an arrow with a rope attached to it, toward the great, gnarly tree directly across the chasm. Felina was pleased when the arrow sank deeply into the tree trunk. Gripping the rope, she ran toward the chasm.

“Felina! What in Jaga’s name are you doing?” Lion-O called after her. He just missed grabbing hold of her before she swung off the edge of the chasm.

Her feet absorbed the impact of meeting with the chasm wall. She continued to push off the wall while gliding down the rope. Felina reached the bluff as the next cosmic blast roared past. Her heart leapt in her throat when she realized the object was indeed the Key of Thundera. And it was about to teeter off into oblivion. Leaping with all her might, she dove for the key, grasping it before it fell. However, her momentum was too great, and Felina found herself tumbling over the edge instead.

Miraculously, she managed to grip an outcropping of rock with her free hand, digging her claws in as far as she could. Looking down into the blackness, Felina could see the flicker of lights far below, signaling another blast of cosmic rays was imminent. Holding the leather strap on the key with her teeth, Felina tried to grip the edge of the bluff with her other hand. Her hold slipping, she felt the rumble of the rays and knew she hadn’t much time. Looking up for what she thought would be the last time she would see the clear blue sky, she instead saw Lion-O. He bent down to lift her to safety, saving her in time to avoid the blast.

“Mountains of Thundera, woman, have you lost your mind?” Lion-O scolded, although she could tell he wasn’t that angry.

“Well, if not for my insanity, we would’ve lost this,” Felina replied, holding up the Key of Thundera for his inspection.

“We’re going to need a lot of luck to make it out of here, given it will be a lot harder to climb up the claw line than it was to slide down it,” he remarked grimly. He extended the claw line upward until it anchored near the lip of the chasm. “After the next blast, I’m going to hope the

line can hoist us both up fast enough. Just pray that we make it."

Pulling Felina close, his grip tight around her waist, Lion-O anticipated the next volley of cosmic rays. The instant they rumbled past, he began retracting the claw line. Though the line pulled them swiftly up the steep chasm walls, they still had a lot of distance to cover. They were still at least fifty yards from the top when the next volley of cosmic energy rocketed toward them. The pair vaulted to safety without a second to spare.



"That was close," Felina said shakily.

"You're not kidding." Lion-O and Felina spun around at the sound of Cheetara's voice.

Lion-O broke into a relieved smile. "Glad to see you guys! And on time, no less." He waved to Tygra, who was still sitting in the driver's seat of the Thunder Tank.

Before Cheetara had opportunity to respond to Lion-O's comments, Snarf bounded into his arms. "Do you see? Do you see why I warned you about the chasm...I specifically said, 'Lion-O, do not fall into the chasm, it's bottomless.' And what do you do? Fall into the chasm, sneeyarf snarf!" Lion-O opened his mouth to speak, but Snarf silenced him with a wagging finger. "Now old Snarf wasn't born yesterday. I know the two of you were laughing at me the other day when I warned you about the chasm. But it was nothing to laugh about. You could've been vaporized by those rays, Lion-O!"

Tousling the yellow tuft of fur atop Snarf's head, Lion-O said, "Are you done lecturing me Snarf? Because I just want to get back to the Lair and get something to eat."

Lion-O gently tossed Snarf into the rear compartment of the Tank where Felina and Cheetara were already getting situated.

Swishing his tail, Snarf replied, "Rrrwl, I don't know what matter of sustenance will await you, Lion-O. I was so worried about you, I left the Lair in the hands of the Thunderkittens and Bela. Certainly, the kittens would starve before they'd even make themselves a sandwich. And that Bela better not venture into my kitchen again. Not only does she make a mess when she cooks, but her food is too spicy," Snarf's face screwed up into a comical grimace. Suddenly, his ears drooped and he cast Felina a sheepish glance. "Sorry to talk about Bela that way, Felina, but...sneeeyarf, well...um..."

"That's ok, Snarf. I realize you and Bela are as opposite as two snarfs could be," she assured him.

Cheetara finally managed to squeeze in a comment during this awkward moment. "I see you recovered the Key...may I see it?"

"Of course," Felina replied, rising from her seat to pass the Key to Cheetara. The Tank lurched forward without warning, sending Felina tumbling backward into Lion-O's lap.

"I know we've shared a lot on this trip," Lion-O joked, "but I'm shocked you're getting so bold."

Felina's cheeks threatened to turn scarlet. "Hmph. Auca carem," she said with a mock glare, before sticking out her tongue and giggling. She made no effort to get up as they shared a laugh over her inside joke.

Snarf cocked his head to one side and regarded their exchange with curiosity. The scene did

not go unnoticed by Cheetara either.

“There’s definitely been a marked change in their relationship and a positive one at that,” she mused inwardly. “I hoped for such a result when I talked Lion-O into accompanying Felina on this quest," she thought as she recalled meeting up with Lion-O in the forest, just after Felina had had words with him. "I sense an urgency concerning the lives of those two. It’s almost as if the future of our clan lies with their happiness. Merely going through the motions of a marriage would not be good enough, somehow. I just hope they manage to find fulfillment within their arranged marriage...for their sake as well as ours.”

“How are Panthro and the Mutant pup progressing?” Lion-O’s query brought Cheetara out of her reverie.

“I’m sure you’re not going to be surprised, but Panthro has already built himself a rather impressive bionic artificial limb,” she informed him.

“Rrrwl, but he was hopping mad when he found out Tygra had repaired the Tank,” Snarf piped in.

“Hopping mad?” Lion-O asked, clearly amused.

Snarf scowled at his charge. “Ok, so it was a bad choice of words, sneeyarf snarf. You can sue me, but all you’ll win is bad back and a splitting headache. I don’t have anything else.”

Cheetara cleared her throat. “Anyway, as for the pup, we found out through the serial code branded on his arm that his name is Jax and he’s about six years old. He’s got quite a severe concussion but Tygra seems to think he’ll recover fully. He’s still very weary of us, though.”

“That’s understandable, with all the propaganda the Mutants spread about us. And since he’s branded, we can assume he hails from one of the hostile Mutant camps,” Lion-O remarked.

Snarf couldn’t hold back comment any longer. Hopping up on an adjacent chair, he studied Lion-O and Felina as they sat together. “The two of you seem rather cozy...”

Seeing the pair start to squirm a bit under Snarf’s scrutiny, Cheetara warned, “Snaaarf!”

“Well, I just wondered why all of a sudden--” Snarf began.

“Snarf!” Cheetara said sharply while glaring at the fuzzy creature. Felina moved across to the vacant seat next to Cheetara. The cheetah projected her best look-what-you’ve-done look at the snarf.

“Here’s the Key,” Felina said, passing the golden object to Cheetara.

“A fine work of Thunderian craftsmanship indeed,” she remarked while looking over the Key.

“Tell me again how you will use this.”

“With this Key, the Guardian of the Book will reveal practically anything you wish to know,” Felina explained. “Lion-O and I decided the first thing we’re going to ask about is Mumm-Ra.”

“Why would you want to know about that old bone bag?” Snarf asked. “He’s pure evil. That’s all you need to know, snarf snarf.”

“Well, he seems that way now, Snarf,” Lion-O noted, “but, as Jaga would say, it’s wise to learn everything there is to know about a situation before leaping to judgment. Exploring Mumm-Ra’s past may give us the information we need to defeat him.”

Snarf wasn’t convinced. “I still don’t see the point. Mumm-Ra is ever-living. There’s no way you can defeat immortal evil like him, sneeyarf.”

“He claims to be ever-living, Snarf. Perhaps we’ll discover a way to subvert the source of his everlasting life,” Lion-O explained.

And soon I know her a little more
She's everything I dreamed
But still I wonder what it would be like
If she'd let me

She don't know where to go
She don't know how to stay
And she don't know how good I can be
Or how much I still pray...

--Pray, E