Chapter 17 of Signal in the Sky

The Devil You Know
By Purrsia Kat

Lion-O silently cursed himself -- and the famine -- for making him so weak. Grunting, he pushed himself into a sitting position and glared at the devil priest. “Stop, you don’t know what you’re doing!” he barked between gasping breaths. In the light of day following the flood and birth of Tygra and Cheetara’s child, he’d set out on the seemingly simple task of finding the Book of Omens Felina lost in the torrent. He gritted his teeth, partly in anger, partly in pain, as he glared at the being who never let anything be so simple -- Mumm-Ra. He feared not even Mumm-Ra could face the Guardian of the Book without the risk of destroying himself. Why he cared was another matter, yet somehow he did. It was a fate no one should be damned to endure.

Mumm-Ra’s ashen lips peeled back into a sinister grin. “This advice, coming from a mere cub. I’ve been here for more than a thousand years, insolent wretch -- I think I can handle stepping inside a magical book.” The golden Book of Omens looked dwarfed in the shadow cast by the mummy’s broad ever-living form. “You thought you were rid of me, but I watched you, boy,” Mumm-Ra’s voice had dropped to a mere sinister whisper. “I know what to do.”

The mummy bent to retrieve the Sword of Omens at his feet, which had flown from its master’s hand during the fierce wrest for control of the Book. It was stuck upright in the muddy riverbank.

Lion-O’s eyes went wide. “Sword of Omens, come to my--”

Mumm-Ra, realizing what Lion-O was attempting to do, silenced him with a powerful blast of energy from his fingertips. The force of it sent Lion-O sliding on his backside, blazing a swath through the muddy earth. Finally, he lost momentum and the ThunderCat Lord remained a motionless heap in the mud, on the brink of unconsciousness. Through the veil of lashes of his barely open eyes, Lion-O was helpless to watch the devil priest walk toward him, knowing full well what Mumm-Ra intended to do. He was powerless to prevent Mumm-Ra from finishing him off once and for all.

“Hey!” WilyKit’s voice rang clearly through the forest, just before she emerged from the stand of trees. “Back off, bone bag.”

Mumm-Ra’s lip curled up in a sneer. “Foolish kitten, I have better things to do than dispose of the pathetic likes of you. Or your not-so-fearless leader,” he added with a cackle.

Kit took rushing steps forward, a pellet already in hand. “Oooooh, you take that back, because if you don’t, you’re going to be begging to take it back when the other ThunderCats get here.”

“Yeah,” Kat chimed in, whooshing onto the scene atop his space board. He attempted to grab the sword out of Mumm-Ra’s clutches with a skillful toss of his lariat, only to have the devil priest grab the incoming rope and yank the boy off his board. He landed hard on the ground, the wind knocked out of him. Clutching his sides, he rocked back and forth and struggled to regain normal breathing.

“WilyKat!” Kit rushed to her winded brother’s side. She looked up and growled softly at the devil priest.

It was then that Mumm-Ra lifted the mystic blade and peered through its apertures at the

Book of Omens, reciting an incantation as he did so. In seconds, he was being drawn into the book amid a storm of light and energy.

Kit leapt to her feet and rushed forward. “Stop!” she demanded of Mumm-Ra’s fading form.

Lion-O’s jolted back to full awareness. He watched helplessly as Kit tried to grab at Mumm-Ra. He expected her to be harshly knocked back by the energy swirling around the mummy, but to his surprise, the Book’s aura surrounded her as well and drew her into the Book with Mumm-Ra. He winced as a final brilliant flash marked their departure, the Sword and Book all that was left behind.

Lion-O pondered why Kit was drawn in instead of repelled as he made his way to WilyKat with staggering steps. Mumm-Ra had hit him hard, and it wasn’t the kind of blow that was going to be quick to bounce back from. At least nothing felt broken. “Kat, are you alright?”

“Yes, but WilyKit --” he gasped, finally getting into a sitting position. “W-what about the Guardian? They don’t have the Key!”

“They don’t need it,” Lion-O said flatly. When Kat’s response was to gape at him incredulously, Lion-O continued on. “He bypassed the Guardian and traveled through time and space, just like Felina and I had done when we investigated Mumm-Ra’s past. I know that because he used the same command I had.” Now he knew what Mumm-Ra meant by watching him - the old adversary was back in a big way, and he wasn’t wasting any time.

Kat got to his feet and glanced around worriedly. “But…he’s a mage. Can’t he just do that on his own? Maybe it’s a trick…and he’s got Kit with him, too! C’mon, Lion-O -- we gotta go after them!”

“Mumm-Ra gets weak when he uses his own energy,” he reminded Kat, “if he can use the Sword and Book to send him across time and space, that’s all the more energy he has left to cause us trouble - or worse.” Lion-O didn’t bother to point out that Kat worried about a trap in one breath but urged him to rush into it in the next. The boy was understandably distressed. “Mumm-Ra’s up to something.” Mumm-Ra could have easily finished him, Lion-O realized, but opted to go into the book instead - that could only mean he had a plan that would do lasting damage to all the ThunderCats.

WilyKat sighed impatiently and muttered, “That’s obvious.”



Felina lay squinting at the late afternoon sun shining into the window of the Warrior Maiden hut where she was recuperating from a sudden flu-like illness. Being half-starved for much of the winter coupled with the exposure to the harsh elements likely brought on such an illness, but at least she would recover with the prescribed rest. And she welcomed the sight of the sun given the weeks of gray, drab skies they previously had to live with. She sighed contentedly - everything seemed to be reaching a point where it could only get better. If she were aware of Lion-O’s struggle, Felina would no doubt think otherwise. For now, ignorance - and the warrior maidens’ homemade drug remedies - was bliss.

She gazed across the room at Panthro, who was stirring from what looked to be quite a comfortable nap. “Look - the sun is shining,” she noted for the groggy panther’s benefit.

Panthro's response was little more than a series of incoherent grunting.

Felina's attention was drawn to the doorway at a bulky silhouette that darkened it. "I've checked the Lair." As soon as he spoke, Felina knew the silhouette belonged to Tygra. Stepping into a shaft of light filtering in from an adjacent window, he continued. "There's some structural damage for certain but the Berbils have promised to lend a hand after they get their own situation under control. Until it's livable again, we'll have to take turns guarding the Lair just to ensure those blasted Mutants don't plunder or otherwise sabotage it."

"Fair enough," Panthro uttered upon finally joining the realm of the coherent, though it was still rather obvious the medications the warrior women had him on for his broken leg kept him a bit foggy nonetheless.

A faint smile touched Tygra's lips. "You seem to be feeling better, old friend."

"Everyone would be feeling better with less interruptions to their rest," Snarf declared while lumbering into the room from the adjoining suite. "It's just common Snarf sense that rest is the best thing for what ails you."

Felina mustered a grin while Tygra chuckled. "Speaking of ailing," the tiger continued, "how are Cheetara and the little one doing?"

Snarf's annoyed demeanor dissolved almost immediately and he paused in the task of fetching fresh dressings for Panthro's leg to reflect thoughtfully. "Cheetara's one tough cat – she's coping with the aftermath of the surgery well, snayarf, snayarf. And the cub…all she does is sleep, Jaga bless her."

"Wonderful," Tygra boomed jovially. "I'll just go in and check up on them—"

"Sneeeyarf! They're resting!" Snarf stated matter-of-factly. He'd been holding Panthro's injured leg, unwrapping the old dressings. He let go of the limb rather clumsily in his haste to chastise Tygra, which elicited a painful howl and curse from Panthro.

"Perhaps the best medicine for the ailing is having a snarf tending to them when he's in a better mood," Tygra joked, still heading toward the doorway where Snarf just came from moments earlier.

"Doesn't anyone listen to me?" Snarf groused as he returned to the task at hand.

"No," Panthro growled. "And for Jaga's sake, watch what you're doing, Snarf!"

Felina stifled a giggle as not to worsen Snarf's mood.

"I can't help it," Snarf said with a sigh, "not after all that's happened and Lion-O—"

"Oh brother," Panthro groaned, letting his head fall back into the pillow.

"What?" asked Snarf indignantly, "He's been gone for hours looking for the Book of Omens and I'm a little worried. Is that a crime?"

"He's a grown man, Snarf, not a cub," Panthro countered. "He'd signal us with the Sword if he were in trouble anyway."

"I've heard that before: 'Don't worry, Snarf. Everything's fine, Snarf.' Next thing you know, we're getting there just in time to save Lion-O's hide. Don't worry, indeed."

Panthro sighed. "I'm right here Snarf – I can hear you muttering." Snarf once again was a bit less than gentle to the panther's injured leg. "Yeeeeeoooow! Dammit, Snarf! Do me a favor and get one of the maidens to do this. Please," he added, more demanding than pleading when Snarf simply looked at him levelly. "Seriously, you're jostling that splint around so much it makes it useless. The idea is to hold my leg *still*. And since I've only got one good leg left, I'd appreciate you not mangling it beyond use."

With a defeated sigh, Snarf ventured out of the hut.

Panthro must have noticed the change in Felina's mood. He propped himself up on his

elbows and studied her closely. “What’s wrong?”

“Snarf reminded me that Lion-O’s out there looking for he Book – the Book *I* lost,” she explained. She sat up in bed, briefly closing her eyes as her head pounded with fever. “I should be out there searching, too.” Tossing her coverlets aside, Felina made as if to get out of bed.

“Hold on there, Snarf is right.”

“What?” came a shrill, distant voice. “I’m right? Do my ears deceive me, schnarf, schnarf.”

“Oh for –- ” Raising his voice, Panthro bellowed, “I thought you were looking for someone to patch up my leg, Snarf, not eavesdropping!”

Sticking his head in the doorway, Snarf replied, “I was, but then I thought I heard the Eye’s roar and paused to listen harder…good thing I did.” The creature grinned from ear to large, unusual ear. “Say it again Panthro. I’m *what*?”

The exchange was enough to set Felina’s mood to light once again, but the same couldn’t be said for Panthro. He gripped a mighty hand around the hollowed out, treated wood that served as his drinking glass from his bedside table and threw it at the snarf. It bounced harmlessly off the doorjamb. “Just go get someone to fix up my leg,” he hollered after Snarf.

The fever really did have the better of her, and Felina leaned back against the headboard in defeat, its cool wood feeling good against her overly warm body. “Two against one – I’ll stay. I am worried though…”

“You too?” Panthro asked incredulously as he worked to sit upright. “Not about Lion-O, I hope. What I told Snarf goes for you too. He’s grown. He’ll be fine. Besides, with everyone having problems from this wild weather we’ve had, I highly doubt even the Mutants would be out to pick a fight with him today. In fact, I bet they’re up to their mangy eyeballs in murky water if that mote around Castle Plundarr gave them nearly as much trouble as ours did.” Panthro chuckled softly to himself, as if pleased by the thought. “Serves ‘em right for building in the middle of a swamp.”

“I guess so,” Felina said with a slight shrug, suddenly feeling quite tired again.

“You know, Lion-O would have an easier time adjusting to his leadership role if we all showed a little more confidence in him.”

“It’s normal to worry about ones you love,” she replied. It took her a moment to realize she’d so easily and for the first time admitted such affection for her assigned mate. A sense of awkwardness swept over her and she could only look at Panthro long enough to see him grin and shake his head knowingly before turning away abashed.

“Nothing to be embarrassed about kid,” Panthro said gently after a silent moment passed. “I’m sure he feels the same.”

Felina met the panther’s gaze and looked at him piercingly. Did he know something? Had Lion-O confessed his feelings to the panther?

“We’re all like a family – it’s a big part of being a Thundercat. We love and care for one another.”

Felina blinked. What was he driving at? This was no time to play coy games, toying with her emotions! She wasn’t sure if it was the medication or just reckless abandon, but she found herself blurting out, “Does Lion-O believe in romantic love? The idea of soul mates?” The whole time her mouth was moving, she couldn’t believe she was asking Panthro of all ThunderCats such an absurd question.

She grew somewhat horrified when he began laughing heartily. By the gods of Thundera, what made her think Lion-O would confide such a thing in Panthro? “Kid, you still believe in childhood fairy tales, don’t you? But if you want to know what Lion-O believes, just ask him.”

Her expression must not have been lost on him as he quickly became serious. He tried to offer something to soften the blow from a personal perspective. "I – well, romantic love, uh, I – Relationships are a lot of work, Felina…I don't think it's as simple as that." He floundered, unsure of what else to say.

Averting her eyes, she sighed. "I'm not asking for happily ever after." She'd come this far in pouring her heart out; she wasn't going to stop now. "I just wondered if, you know, I should hope for anything, you know, given my situation, like – like – " She wanted to draw the comparison between herself and Lion-O with Cheetara and Tygra but couldn't spit out the words.

"Am I interrupting?" Panthro never looked so glad to see Nayda in his life and Felina never so crestfallen. "I can come back…"

"No, no," Panthro said eagerly. "Have you seen Snarf? He was supposed to be looking for someone slightly gentler to tend to me."

Felina simply offered Nayda a weak smile and slumped down slightly in bed.

Nayda seemingly shrugged off whatever was going on between the pair. "Actually, I am who Snarf summoned."

It was Panthro's turn to be dumbstruck. "You?"

Felina rose slightly and cast Panthro a puzzling look. Nayda's expression mirrored it. "Is there a problem with that?"

Sure, Felina thought, she could be imagining things again due to her pharmaceutically altered mind, but she could swear Panthro seemed suddenly awkward around Nayda. Awkward in the way a schoolboy is around his crush, if she didn't know any better.



Lion-O stood amid a strangely familiar jungle, taking in his surroundings and painfully aware that he was alone, somewhat injured and unarmed. He supposed he could have let WilyKat come along, but someone had to go tell the others what was going on just in case – well, in case the worst happened, he thought grimly. Resisting the urge to call out for WilyKit, he cautiously moved on while trying to keep a low profile. He needed to assess the situation as well as try to figure out just where in time this was. And he couldn't stop thinking about how familiar it all felt – almost like he was still on Third Earth. Lost in thought, he almost stumbled right into a clearing where two men were having a heated conversation. Hunkering down, Lion-O peered through the leaves of a large jungle fern and listened – he couldn't risk being seen by anyone just yet. And if he were lucky, the two would bring him important clues about exactly where he was.

"You see, this is what they mean by ethics, Professor," the bespectacled man declared, clearly exasperated.

The Professor seemed equally out of patience. "But Hal, it's impossible to know how these things are going to go, and when they get out of hand, we have to do what's good for mankind – for the good of the Earth. Such are the perils of experimentation and discovery."

Hal scoffed, bowing his head and shaking it vehemently – so much so his spectacles

threatened to lose their grip. “You speak as if we’re mopping up a spill or any other thing one could take such a cavalier attitude toward. But, I brought you out here, in the middle of an African jungle because what we helped create can *understand* what we’re talking about. We may have created something we fear we can’t control anymore, but it’s sentient - it’s life. You just can’t – can’t *execute* them and move on to the next experiment.”

Lion-O’s brow furrowed deeply. Earth? Africa? It sounded like he was where Third Earther’s like to call First or Second Earth. Judging from the men’s dress and demeanor, it wasn’t First Earth – he’d been there with Felina when they investigated Mumm-Ra’s past. Why on Thundera would Mumm-Ra choose this point in time to go back to?

“Word is leaking out about what we’ve been doing. It’s only a matter of time – we’ve already got media from the States lurking around the compound. And if they see them, you know it won’t just be the religious fanatics in hysterics over the half-breeds. When geneticists like us cloned the first sheep a century ago, it was bad enough. Lobbyists managed to halt funding and thus progress in our field for years after that. Is that what you want? We’ve learned what we can from the half-breeds, but if this gets out now, there won’t be any money coming in so we can apply it to humanity’s needs.”

“Jon, you know as well as I do – these aren’t just lab rats. They have very human qualities—"

“Of course they do,” interrupted the Professor. “They’re bred with human DNA.”

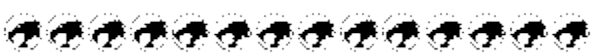
“I know, I was there,” Hal quipped. “But they turned out far more sentient than we ever predicted. They feel, think and reason like we do – so unlike the animals they were bred from. I think they deserve better than – than what would befall a common lab rat!”

Jon sighed heavily. “Yes, and they’re also a lot stronger, and in some cases, smarter than a lot of people are. You don’t think that’s going to send civilized societies around the world into mass hysteria? And when that happens, do you think the crazed masses will be humane about exterminating the mutants? We barely tolerate one another’s race or religion – good luck convincing horrified masses that a bizarre looking lion-humanoid hybrid won’t snap them in two.”

Lion-O’s ears perked up. Mutants? Not *the* Mutants. It couldn’t be. He mentioned lions but used the term ‘mutant’. Lion-O was more confused than ever.

After a few moments of stony silence between the men, in which Lion-O was sure they would detect his breathing, Jon cryptically ended the conversation. “It’s settled. We follow through with the original plan tomorrow. It’s for the best. Someday you’ll see that.”

Hal said nothing but looked broodingly determined. As the men turned to walk away, Lion-O decided to follow. Maybe if some kind of mutant was here, that’s what Mumm-Ra came for – an army of sorts to recruit. It was worth investigating.



“Oooh, what is that old bone bag up to?” whispered WilyKit, as she struggled to balance on a pile of crates she’d stacked under one of the compound’s windows. “It’s times like this I hate being so blasted short.” Pushing up on her tiptoes, her eyes barely cleared the windowsill. It was

getting dark outside, and no lights were on inside. She could make out what looked to be rows of cages below, as well as some movement. “Drat, I know he’s around here somewhere.”

“WilyKit.”

Surprised at hearing her name, Kit lost her balance and tumbled off with the crates crashing down shortly afterward. She did a double take when she found herself securely in the muscled arms of Lion-O. “Am I glad that’s you and not cold, dead and gruesome,” she declared with marked relief.

Lion-O silently rushed her around the corner of the building before setting her down and it was just in time. The same pair of scientists Lion-O had followed rounded the opposite side of the building, no doubt spurred by the ruckus the falling crates had made.

“Jon, over there – those crates! What could have happened?”

“Maybe one of your gentle mutants escaped…”

Kit looked up at Lion-O wide-eyed, but he motioned for her to remain silent.

After the men decided to go inside to check for signs of escapees, Lion-O explained. “I followed you into the book and then I followed them here. I believe whatever they’re hiding in there is what Mumm-Ra’s after –”

“I followed Mumm-Ra here, too!” Kit nearly squealed, and a bit too loudly judging from Lion-O’s stern look. “Oh, now we gotta get in there.”

“That’s what I intend on doing,” Lion-O replied, gazing up at the high window Kit was just peering through moments earlier.

“Well just take the Sword and blast in there,” Kit suggested eagerly.

Lion-O shook his head. “For one thing, we have to be careful about how much we interact here – we’re in another time and the slightest altering of events can change history, possibly for the worse. And most importantly – I don’t have the Sword.”

“Oh. Rats.” She’d forgotten that stupid rule about Book travel.

“We’ll try the roof – maybe there’s some way in up there,” he suggested. Wasting no time, he extended his sheathed arm and shot the claw line to the roof’s edge. Grabbing Kit by the waist, he hoisted them both up.

Scanning the roof in the gathering darkness, Kit was starting to feel like this route was a hopeless one. Then she spotted something. “Lion-O, look!” Scampering to the spot she’d indicated, her spirits rose. “It looks like a grate of some sort – maybe for ventilation. It could be our way in.”

Indeed, the shaft lead inside and as luck would have it the scientists had secured (or so they thought) the complex and left by the time the ThunderCats made their way through the duct.

“Glad we’re out of there,” Lion-O announced in hushed tones as he followed Kit out into the open expanse of room. “That was a tight fit for me.”

"Not for me,” Kit bragged. She was almost pleased his size hindered him in this instance, as the fact that Lion-O aged in stasis when her and Kat had not was often a sore spot for her. Size indeed wasn’t always everything.

Both fell silent as they scanned the darkened room. Countless cages lined the aisles and Kit knew it was the same room she’d looked down in from the window. Her expression grew incredulous as she realized just what lurked inside each cage. Some looked like her ancestors – resembling, say Grune, except even more feral in appearance. Others looked more like the Mutants, and when Kit’s eyes met those of a creature that eerily resembled Monkian, she instinctively moved closer to Lion-O.

“What is this place?” she whispered.

"A lab. One where genetic experiments take place."

The creatures stared back at the pair with mistrust glistening in their eyes, but Kit also sensed intelligence behind them – as well as a strange kinship with the feline kind.

Kit startled when one of the felines spoke. "Strange night full of strange visitors." He eyed them closely, curiously. And to Kit he looked like he could have belonged to an old Thunderian cheetah clan. She wanted to ask him about 100 questions but thought it best to let Lion-O speak first. Besides, he spoke in a strange tongue she didn't recognize. She was shocked when Lion-O replied in kind, and so was the caged man.

"I am Lion-O, Lord of the ThunderCats. I've come here pursuing an enemy that traveled through time and space – it's a little hard to explain," Lion-O admitted sheepishly.

"Huh?" was all Kit could muster.

"ThunderCat? Ah, that would explain your peculiar appearance," the cheetah hybrid replied after getting over the surprise and began speaking normally. "And the, uh, outfit."

"Peculiar appearance?" Kit echoed, a bit defensively. "You're one to talk."

"Easy little one. We mutants mean no harm, contrary to popular belief."

"You're no Mutant-"

Lion-O put his hand on Kit's shoulder, stopping her short. "Do you have a name, sir?"

"Officially, I'm known as Felis A23, which has a meaning denoting the particulars of my genetic mutations but I won't bore you with that. Unofficially, I'm Chet. I am curious, however. How did you know the language?"

"Boy, if Tygra or Felina were here, they'd be beggin' to be bored," Kit declared. "How'd you get so smart anyway?"

"Kit please," Lion-O interjected. "It was taught to me as it was taught to you."

WilyKit suddenly realized why how they spoke seemed somewhat familiar – it was that tongue-tying stuff Felina was known to babble in.

Lion-O's explanation seemed to satisfy him. In response to Kit's query, Chet shrugged. "All of us, our lives have been one big human experiment. For a select few others - including myself - the idea was to see how much knowledge we could absorb. We performed a bit too well, it seems."

"So you know?"

Kit looked from Lion-O to Chet and back again. "Know what, Lion-O?"

"That we're not long for this world?" Chet replied. "Of course. But we have a plan."

Lion-O looked visibly relieved.

"Are you crazy, Chet?" cried the avian hybrid in the cage across the aisle. "We don't know these strangers! What if they're in league with the others?"

"They're harmless," Chet replied confidently. "Afterall, they know the bogus language we invented to aid in our escape."

"They should have omitted your arrogance gene," the birdman squawked, throwing his feathered arms up in exasperation. "We go to the trouble to design a code language, and this one spills the beans to any stranger that strolls by his cage. Incredible. You know, there are a such thing as spies."

"On the contrary, it's that other interloper that concerns me. He looked similar to the devil we know – the one we've seen before, moving in the shadows wherever havoc is soon to follow…" Chet trailed off, worry washed over his face.

"Mumm-Ra," Lion-O uttered under his breath.

As if on cue, the old mummy's trademark cackle traveled down the aisle like a shiver up the

spine. “Yes, the ever living devil priest of first, second and third earth is here – you’re damn right to quake in fear.”

“I don’t know what you’re doing here, Mumm-Ra, but—”

“Save the smarmy speech, we’ve heard it all before,” the mummy roared, spittle glistening in the moonlight. It was then that he moved his arm, revealing what he was hiding beneath his cape-like cloak. Dazed and weary, a lion hybrid stared back at the pair of ThunderCats. “Meet Leonus the Wanderer, Lion-O, the patriarch of your line. Take a good look. Because as soon as I finish him off, you’ll cease to exist!”



While the life-and-death drama unfolded in the compound, a few of its more-clever residents stole silently through the jungle. They were locked in their own life and death struggle, most quite aware of what their future held. Or rather, that they had no future at all if they simply did nothing. So, with the moonlight as their guide the mutants traveled on foot for hours, until the jungle gave way to savannah and savannah to the cooling sands of the desert.

A vulture mutant landed softly beside the others, the breeze from his great, feathered wings rustling their fur.

“I can’t believe Leonus didn’t show up for the journey!” the birdman squawked.

The lion woman he’d landed near studied him closely. “You know how it is for us, Avis. Maybe he couldn’t get away from the compound in time.”

“She’s right,” an aged and agitated jaguar added. “If it weren’t for Leonus, we wouldn’t know about this place in the desert – we don’t call him the wanderer for nothing. He’s done more to help our situation than any of us. I don’t know why you scavengers have got to be so cynical.”

Avis cawed in protest. “I wasn’t complaining. I was simply making an observation.” He fell back slightly from the rest of the group to sulk.

“Ok,” he heard the jaguar continue in hushed tones. “It’s going to be harder to find in the darkness, but the entrance to the underground tunnels should be around here somewhere. Start digging in the sand if you have to.”

After some difficulty, they found that which they sought and tapped on the smooth steel in Morse code fashion. Shortly thereafter, the door lifted up and a human peeked her head out into the cooled desert night air. Instead of being alarmed, the mutants obeyed as she motioned for them to follow – she was obviously someone they trusted. Ascending under the desert sands, the group of mutants found themselves inside tunnels Felina would have recognized as those in which she’d rescued Jax.

“The ships are ready?” the jaguar asked the jittery lab tech that guided them. She nodded quickly in response.

Lucky for them, only the scant night staff was on duty and a good number of them were sympathetic to their plight, so they moved about more or less freely. Though the friendly humans did what they could to help, if they were caught doing so, they could meet an unpleasant fate as well. In that respect, Avis couldn’t blame her for being on edge.

However, Avis had other plans – he was one bird that knew when he wasn’t wanted. Or

appreciated. He slipped down a side corridor unnoticed by the others. He wasn't sure what it was he hoped to accomplish, but with any luck he might discover something to esteem him in the eyes of his peers. Maybe he'd find something they overlooked that would lead to a better escape plan than Leonus hatched. Although he wasn't sure what that would be. Avis had to admit that finding this underground network of tunnels that housed all sorts of labs and technology, including spaceships with which they could flee the planet, was an excellent start. After all, it was obvious that trying to survive in this world with so many hostile humans would be no kind of life, not to mention that there was no guarantee how long they could manage it even if they all simply fled the compound to try their luck at surviving in the jungles. Avis hadn't been to many places that wasn't infested with humans at one time or another – where could his ilk even stay hidden? As much as he hated to admit it, Leonus' plan to flee the planet Earth was the best option, despite no guarantee there could be an inhabitable world for them to flee to. Friendly scientists in the lab already had a ship ready for them with a course plotted in the autopilot to a world in a nearby galaxy that *might* support life. His hope was to find something that could at least enhance their journey or increase their chances of survival. If Leonus was impressed enough, he might even become his right hand man as it was clear to Avis that Leonus had long since emerged as their natural born leader.

His musings were cut short when he came to the end of the long corridor, only to find a door that had been welded shut. Someone didn't want anyone going beyond this point, and that only intrigued the scavenger in Avis. Glancing about, his keen bird eyes spied a vent grate high above the door. No problem for him, he thought boastfully – sometimes it paid to be one of the few mutants with wings.

Crawling on his hands and knees, Avis shuffled his way through the narrow, cobweb-filled shaft and he did not like it one bit. What bird would enjoy being in such a confined space? If he found something of value, the others better appreciate what he went through to get it. Damp, musty air met his nostrils as he neared the end of the tunnel. He was relieved to see there was at least a dim light coming from beyond where the conduit ended.

Cautiously, he peered out of the opening, his senses temporarily fooled by the dancing shadows the candlelight produced. After he realized the movement in the room was an illusion, his eyes widened at what he saw – piles of gold coins, jewels and other treasures piled high throughout the dank room. No wonder the door was welded shut! Avis leapt to the cold stone floor using his wings to glide to a soft landing. He found the cobblestone floor such a stark contrast it was to the sleek, modern metals and alloys in the underground tunnel network and he surmised the structure outdated the tunnels by millennia perhaps. Avis continued to take in the sparkling contents of the room as if disbelieving his own eyes. It was a scavenger's dream. So focused was he on the glittering prize that he failed to notice a stone door below a symbolic ornament of two snakes intertwined to form a figure eight, as it all but blended in to the wall. Nor did he notice the sleek and graceful movements of a shadow that was not conjured by the wall torches.

His beady eyes passed over the glare on the usual prized items such as diamonds and gold coins. Avis liked to fancy himself an intelligent being as if to rise above the usual scoffing having to do with his so-called scavenger nature. So no, he was after something that would be viewed as rare and thus even more valuable. Finally, a small, gem-encrusted chest caught his eye. He had to wade into a cascading mountain of coins to reach it, but reach it he did. Carefully raising the lid, his eyes widened at the sight of the treasures inside. These were gorgeous, perhaps priceless artifacts from a time long gone – a time when quality and craftsmanship

mattered. Among the items were a delicate chain, a regal-looking chalice, a book with gold-plated bindings, and an elegant golden key. Yes, this would do. Snapping the lid shut, Avis tucked his bounty under a winged arm and turned to go. But the crimson glint from a nearby gem caught his eye. As if drawn to it, Avis bent closer and gently swept several coins away from the item. It was beautiful – a polished, ruby-like rounded gem with a swath of golden hue streaked through its center. It almost looked like the eyes of his feline counterparts.

Just as Avis palmed the gem, he became aware of a low growl emanating from behind him. He turned in time to see a tawny streak of a beast diving toward him. Cawing a shriek of surprise, Avis dropped the treasure box he'd so carefully chosen and instinctively took flight. The beast managed to clip a few tail feathers with its deadly claws, but Avis got away unharmed – for now. When the creature landed, Avis realized it was a lithe and agile lynx. And being what he was, Avis wasn't shocked to find the animal could speak.

"Thief!" it hissed. "Maftet will not let you leave the pyramid unpunished!"

Avis almost considered arguing with Maftet, explaining how he only wanted a few items to help himself and fellow mutants escape this forsaken planet. But what use would negotiating with the greedy guardian of these treasures be, especially when Maftet was gracefully leaping from beam to beam on an upward path to continue his assault. He certainly didn't seem to be inclined to reason. The ceiling was low – it wasn't going to take long for Maftet to get within pouncing distance. Hovering above, Avis enviously spied the box he'd dropped. He had to get it. Something inside the birdman urged him to risk life and limb for it. Seeing that Maftet was crouched and about to spring forward in another attempt to julienne the hapless mutant with those claws of his, Avis waited for the right moment to make his move. The instant Maftet sprang into the air, Avis dived down with his focus on the treasure box below. With the skill of a bird of prey, he gripped the box with his talon-like feet while Maftet overshot his target and landed with a jangling cacophony into a pile of coins. Just as quickly as Avis descended, he was airborn again and made a beeline for the vent he'd earlier exited. Dropping the treasure box in first and still gripping the strange ruby gem, Avis hastily followed. Glancing back, he was shocked to see Maftet at the vents opening – he'd never met a cat that could jump so high or so far. The only thing working for Avis was the fact that Maftet's hard, razor-like claws couldn't grip very well onto the stone and thus his pursuer was having issues hoisting himself all the way into the shaft.

Avis groaned inwardly as he pushed his treasure along and wondered why the blasted tunnel seemed twice as long as it had been before. A slight sense of relief washed over him when he heard Maftet's increasingly distant curses.

"Thief! No one steals from the treasure chamber of Mumm-Ra the Everliving and lives."

Reaching the end of the shaft, Avis muttered, "Oh yeah? I just did." Once out into the more familiar modern passageways, Avis took wing again. He needed speed not only to guarantee he out-distance his furry friend should he make it through the shaft, but to find his friends before they left him behind.



Back at the compound – or what was left of it - Lion-O's eyes watered from the billowing smoke and he squinted to see the lock belonging to the cage in front of him. He couldn't be sure Mumm-Ra was disposed of after that incredible fight which left the compound in a sad state. The fire now threatened to finish those that couldn't pick the locks on their cages fast enough and escape. If any of the Mutants died that shouldn't have as a result of this, Jaga only knew the implications. And so, Lion-O coughed back the thickening smoke to try to save all he could. He tried not to think about the humans coming back and foiling the mutants' escape, as surely the semi-demolished and burning structure would attract them. If their plan failed not only were the ThunderCats future existence in jeopardy but so were that of his enemies as well.

"Lion-O," Kit rasped between hacking coughs. "I think everyone's out. I checked twice." Kit's posture reflected the pain she obviously felt, as she stood slightly stooped over with one hand pressed to her side.

"Good, go wait outside with the others. I'll be along soon," he urged her, watching her with concern as she limped away. She was a brave kid, but using her spin and roll trick to attack Mumm-Ra before he could finish off Leonus had hurt her and Lion-O was worried as to the true extent of her injuries. If it weren't for her quick thinking and selfless action, he wouldn't have been able to get the jump on Mumm-Ra or save his forefather from harm. One consolation was the fierce fight that followed took a lot out of both himself and Mumm-Ra. With any luck, the mummy was just as worn out.

Finally, the lock clicked open and Lion-O ducked into the cage. The simian man inside was already unconscious from the smoke, so Lion-O gingerly picked him up. Unfortunately, the building was so smoky it blotted out what illumination the fire afforded and now he couldn't see a thing. He quickly became disoriented and panicked when he couldn't find a way out. In the face of all the overpowering smoke, he sank to his knees and passed out.



Lion-O's vision was blurry when he came to, and so it took him some time to assess his situation. Wherever he was, it was a lot brighter which didn't help the vision impairment at all.

"What – where?" he stammered, struggling to sit up on his elbows. He flinched defensively when a pair of hands gently pressed on his shoulders.

"It's okay, Lion-O," a female promised him in low tones. He immediately recognized it as Kit. As if deciphering the whirlwind of questions in his mind, Kit continued, "We're on a ship with the others, beyond Earth's atmosphere. Everyone got out of the compound okay and Mumm-Ra's not anywhere to be seen."

Her last few words were pinched with tones of pain. Lion-O blinked rapidly in an effort to make her blurred form come into focus. "Are *you* okay?"

"Yeah. I mean, it hurts but…yeah."

Lion-O sighed with relief. Mumm-Ra seemed to be thwarted once again. But there was one problem – he couldn't be sure the crafty mage wasn't just waiting for he and Kit to leave so he can have one more swipe at Leonus. However, they couldn't just stay in the time warp. He groaned inwardly – time was always on Mumm-Ra's side. At least the fog was starting to clear

from Lion-O's eyes and his mind.

"You said everyone got out. Did that include the one I was rescuing?"

Kit nodded. "You probably saved Monkian's relative."

Lion-O shrugged weakly. "Even so, it had to be done. Who are we to alter time and space?"

"I see you're awake," Leonus warmly intoned by way of entrance. The lab tech who had led the others to the ship was with him, and went about the task of seeing to the ThunderCats' injuries.

Before Lion-O could reply, he was overcome by a fit of coughing that seemed like it would never stop wracking his body.

"You breathed a lot of smoke, my friend." When Lion-O's coughing settled down, Leonus smiled sympathetically. "I'm not sure what that creature spoke of back there on Earth, but I owe the both of you my life."

The human woman spoke. "There are some legends about an Everliving being in the decrepit guise of an old Pharaoh lurking about. Some say that after the great library at Alexandria burned, the undead creature was sought out by a band of old world mages and destroyed as they believed this Everliving devil influenced and orchestrated so many of the ancient world's plagues, wars and other disasters. Some legends say his dark pyramid was buried in a great sandstorm that curiously left the other pyramids standing. Others say the sand beneath the dark pyramid was made into quicksand – a sinking sand, if you will – by a mage's spell. Many conclude the creature no longer exists. However, you'll find those who swear that over the millennia since he's still around, lurking in the shadows and exerting evil influence. Not as powerful as before, mind you, but still there – still whispering treacherous ideas into the ears of mad men." Her voice trailed off and it took her a moment to gain her composure. "From what you've said of this creature's appearance and given what condition he left the compound in, it does sound like that of the feared devil from the sands of Egypt."

"We no longer have to fear him," Leonus concluded. "We're away from that cursed planet for good."

"Don't be so sure about that," Kit muttered.

It was strange for Lion-O to look his ancestor in the eye. So much so, it gave Lion-O a strange feeling in the pit of his stomach so that all words abandoned him. He simply nodded slightly.

Leonus, after studying Lion-O and Kit silently, mused, "You seem so familiar…"

"He should," Kit said softly, "he's only your great-times-a-million grandson."

"Pardon?"

"She said nothing," Lion-O answered while shooting Kit a curious look.

The awkward moment was mercifully ended by Avis' hesitant entrance. Lion-O could tell by the way the birdman's eyes darted about the room that he didn't entirely trust him or Kit. He was intrigued to see just how well most of these 'mutants' got along. It made him wonder – if these were the ancestors of Thunderians and what he knew to be Mutants alike, what could have caused such a rift between their people? Lion-O's eyes fell to the glistening golden box the avian clutched. This didn't go unnoticed by Avis who made no attempt to be casual about hiding it from Lion-O's view with a wing. It looked to Lion-O to be just like the box they used to keep the Treasure of Thundera in back on Thundera. Not long before Thundera died, his father Claudis took him to the chamber where they kept the Treasure – it was in an unusual box. Surely that couldn't be the same thing! But then, how many similar items exist in the universe?

"A moment with you if you please, Leonus."

"What is it Avis? Anything you want to tell me can be said in front of our new friends, I'm sure."

Avis trained his eyes on Leonus, giving Lion-O the feeling that the avian aimed to make things as socially uncomfortable as possible – perhaps hoping Kit and he would leave. He was due to be disappointed as Lion-O had no plans to leave.

"I know things are bound to be riddled with uncertainty wherever we are heading," Avis began nervously. "So, before we left, I managed to find this." With that, he revealed the shiny box from beneath his wing.

"Oh?" Leonus hesitantly took the box.

"Open it," the birdman squawked, his tone nearly demanding. He was either eager to please, Lion-O thought, or eager for some other reason…

Lion-O's posture stiffened as a terrifying thought crossed his mind: What if Avis wasn't really Avis but rather Mumm-Ra in disguise? It would be tragically ironic if opening that box meant the same for Leonus as it had for Mumm-Ra's long-suffering alter ego, Pharaoh Mefeset. The warning he wanted to sound so badly caught in his scratchy throat and he looked on helplessly as Leonus tilted back the box's gilded lid. Seconds seemed to stretch on agonizingly slow before Leonus finally lifted something out of the box.

"This is unusual," he mused, lifting the amulet so that it nearly glowed ruby red under the light.

Lion-O's jaw dropped, and he glanced at Kit to see his expression mirrored on her face. It was the Eye of Thundera. It looked a little strange to him without being nestled securely in the hilt of the Sword of Omens, but it was definitely the Eye – Lion-O could sense its power. And seemingly, so could Leonus. The feral lion-man appeared mesmerized by the gem. That is until the Eye took on a glow that emanated from within, and Leonus' golden cat's eyes mimicked that glow. Alarmed, Leonus faltered, nearly dropping the Eye in the process.

"So unusual," he murmured, his amber eyes still fixed on the Eye. If Lion-O didn't already know with certainty that this was what would become known as the Eye of Thundera, he'd have thought Mumm-Ra was up to his underhanded tricks again. But there was no mistaking the pull of the source of his people's power.

For Avis' part, he went from shocked to puzzled as events unfolded. In the end, Avis seemed to shrug the event off – for now. "Yes, it is odd – the oddest piece of all the valuables I found – the other pieces being in a safe place that I'll show you later," he added pointedly. "But as the closest thing we have to a leader and because you are the one who found a way to these ships for our escape, I thought you were due some token of thanks. The other objects – they can be bartered if need be. As I said, we don't know where we're going or what we'll be up against…" Little did Avis know but the objects he sought to win favor for himself would end up partially to blame for the rift that would develop between many of their kind. Nor was he aware that the Eye knew where they were going – even now, its power was taking the ship off its current prescribed course and steering it home toward what they would come to know as Thundera.

Kit snorted under her breath. "What a total brown-beak," she scoffed, just loud enough for Lion-O to hear.

Lion-O fought back a smile. Like Vultureman, Avis wasn't exactly a master of skillful subtlety.

"Thank you," Leonus replied, still clearly awed. "Wherever did you find such a thing?"

Avis visibly brightened. "While the others hustled through the catacombs under the desert, I

took a different route – hoping to find something of value. Which I did."

"So, near the pyramids then."

The human woman's brow wrinkled with concern and Lion-O and WilyKit exchanged a glance.

"Yes, in fact I think it was in one of the pyramids – I had to get around a sealed door to gain access to its treasure chamber," Avis continued boastfully. "I even fought off some manner of vicious beast that fancied its name Maftet."

The woman gasped but if she had any insight to reveal, she kept it to herself.

Lion-O's jaw went slack, as he had also met a 'beast' guarding a treasure chamber during his last Anointment Trial – the treasure chamber in Mumm-Ra's Black Pyramid. How would the Eye of Thundera be found in there of all places? Although, he did recall Mumm-Ra mentioning how the ThunderCats' arrival on Third Earth put the Eye in his reach *again*. So, it was making sense to some extent. A flash of red lightning put an end to Lion-O's thoughts. To his horror, Mumm-Ra – albeit in his mummy form – materialized to stand between Avis and Leonus.

"It's you," the terrified woman gasped.

"I believe this belongs to me," Mumm-Ra rasped, taking the Eye from a stunned Leonus. "I may not have the strength to finish what I originally came to do, but no one steals the fruits of my plunders." The mummy turned and fixed his sunken, blood red eyes on Avis who was visibly quivering.

"His beak isn't the only thing brown now, I bet," Kit uttered.

Lion-O didn't have time for wisecracks. It was obvious this was the future Mumm-Ra and if he were allowed to take the Eye now, it would surely alter events unfavorably. Springing from the table he'd been sitting on, he lunged at Mumm-Ra.

"I'm right behind you, Lion-O," Kit exclaimed as she competently sent her lariat toward the mummy's decayed hand that cupped the Eye of Thundera.

At the same time, Lion-O called to the Sword of Omens. His hope was to grab Mumm-Ra at just the right time so that all of them would be pulled back to present day Third Earth simultaneously. Hopefully with the speed with which they attacked and in his weakened state, Mumm-Ra wouldn't be able to counter-attack or flee of his own will.



WilyKat burst into the hut where Panthro and Felina were laid up, Sword in one hand and Book of Omens in the other. Both had been dozing off but startled when the flustered kitten entered.

"Kat, what on Third Earth…?" Panthro declared.

"Mumm-Ra went and then Lion-O went in and Kit got sucked in before that and now they're gone!" Kat babbled, all in a rush.

"Slow down," Panthro urged, with an edge of annoyance. Kids got too excitable as far as he was concerned. Even if there was reason for panic, it never helped a situation.

"They all went into the Book?" Felina interjected, not even trying to mask the worry in her voice.

Kat nodded. “They all went through time and space.”

Panthro worked to sit up in bed. “Now what?” His question was directed at Felina. “Technology’s my specialty, not this hocus-pocus stuff.”

Felina looked stressed, as if she was struggling to get her thoughts straight. “Someone will have to go in after them – they’ll need all the help they can against the likes of Mumm-ra. I could use a recall spell to call them back from here, but it’s risky. It’s one of those things that if not done right, the outcome isn’t pleasant. Unfortunately, I’ve never done that before.”

Panthro groaned. “This is not time to second guess yourself, kid – or for anyone to go chasing around time and space after them – we don’t even know where exactly they went. If you can do something, then do it.”

At that time, Nayda and Snarf returned with more supplies for their sick and ailing friends. “What’s going on?” Snarf demanded suspiciously, apparently sensing something was not right. “It’s Lion-O, isn’t it?”

“No time to explain, Snarf,” Panthro snapped. All they needed was Snarf’s hysterics to add to the mix.

Snarf cocked his head and shot Panthro a perturbed look. “Give that one more medication,” he told Nayda.

“Medicate yourself, furball,” Panthro grumbled.

“Ok, all this bickering isn’t helping,” pleaded Felina. Rising out of bed, she faltered a bit and had to rest a hand back on the mattress for support for a moment until the wooziness passed. “I – I’m trying to think of the recall spell. It’s a little more complicated than most…”

“Recall spell? What the gall-darned! Someone better tell me what’s going on.” When silence greeted Snarf’s demands, he was not deterred. “It’s Lion-O, isn’t it? He’s in peril! I know it because Kat has the Book and the Sword and there’s no Lion-O in sight. Oh I knew something would go wrong, I knew it!”

“For Jaga’s sake, Snarf, pipe down so Felina can think,” WilyKat pleaded. “She’s the only one that can get them out of the Book quickly –”

“Give me that Boo--ooook!”

As Snarf grabbed the Book of Omens, it pulsed with power, thereby frightening the poor creature. He let go of the tome, which remained levitated in the air and not a second later the Sword flew from Kat’s hand and rotated above the Book’s cover.

“You could give a snarf some warning, Felina,” pouted Snarf.

“I’m not doing it. They must be coming back on their own.”

Sure enough first Lion-O, then Kit, and finally a very dazed Mumm-Ra tumbled onto the floor. Without fanfare or ceremony, the embattled mummy used the last bit of his power to simply disappear into reddish ether.

Snarf broke the room’s silence by leaping at Lion-O and clinging to him tightly. “Lion-O, I just knew you’d be alright.”

“Oh brother,” Panthro uttered. “A minute ago, you were sounding the bells of doom, Snarf.”

“Didn’t I tell you to up his medication?” Snarf jokingly asked Nayda, who laughed in response.

“Take it easy, Snarf.” Lion-O winced as he tried to peel the snarf off of him.

Snarf’s eyes went wide in alarm. “Oh, you’re hurt! Forget Panthro, help Lion-O!”

Nayda appeared at their side and helped Lion-O to the bed where Felina once again sat. “I’ll live, Snarf,” Lion-O assured his loyal friend.

WilyKat had long rushed to his sister’s side. His face was awash with concern when she

cradled her side in pain as he guided her to her feet.

"Old bone bag's shins are harder than ya might think," she offered sheepishly.

"What was Mumm-Ra doing in there anyway?" Snarf wondered.

"What matters is he didn't succeed. And I don't think he'll have the strength to bother us for a while so hopefully, we can all recover." Beaten and weary Lion-O fell back into the soft bed. Throwing an arm up over his eyes, he sighed.

Panthro relaxed as it looked like the direness of the situation from only a moment ago was effectively diffused. "You only look slightly worse for wear," he joked. "And the best part is Snarf will finally stop wailing." He pointedly ignored the indignant nursemaid's glare as he went on. "Everyone who loves you is happy to see you back in one piece, Lion-O. Now maybe we can all get some rest." He held Felina's gaze and almost regretted his pointed comment when she blushed furiously beneath her fur.

"Panthro, please…" she strained, forcing a weak smile. She looked away when Lion-O lifted his arm to cast her a questioning look.

"What?" Panthro asked innocently. "Nothing wrong with admitting genuine affection."

"Really…then I'm sure you won't mind confessing yours to Nayda."

Panthro simply stared at Felina in disbelief and was all but too aware of Nayda's insistent eyes on him. Clearing his throat, Panthro muttered the beginnings to a dozen sentences but was somehow unable to complete any of them. He hadn't been that obvious about the effect Willa's pretty little sister had on him, had he? Damn women and their powers of perception.

Snarf's ears shot upright as he regarded Panthro's reaction. "Oh really? How very interesting."

The Thunderkittens just looked at each other and tittered, though WilyKit had to stop as it was clearly causing her too much pain.

Now Panthro wished he had taken more of that medication anyway – anything to slip into a coma and out of this uncomfortable situation. Panthro leaned back against the headboard and squeezed his eyes shut.

A life to call our own
That is ours alone
Is as hard as hell to come by these days
Time that I took what's mine, took it now
Things aren't what they where, they're what they are
There's no time of our own
And the devil you know is the only one
Is time too fast for us to grasp something of our own?
The ghost of the past has its arms around me
It moves everywhere in all I hear and see
And the devil you know is the only one
Look at you now, look at you then, see how you will be

All of your life belongs to me
Things aren't what they where, they're what they are
There's no time of our own
And the devil you know is the only one

-- The Devil You Know, Jesus Jones