Chapter 20 of Signal in the Sky

Red Mosquito
By Purrsia Kat & Spaced Angel

Through the impenetrable mire of unconsciousness, sensation slowly returned. First came the gentle touch of warm water, lapping around his lower legs, and then the intense heat of the sun, searing on his bare back. Darkness retreated as the piercing yellow glow of daylight intruded through his closed eyelids and forced him to acknowledge his nearing wakefulness. Whatever was out there was demanding his attention and would not be denied. All the same, it took every ounce of strength that Tygra had to force himself to open his eyes.

The first thing he saw was a small blue-green crab a few inches from his nose. Its stalk-like eyes waved warily in his general direction and two large serrated claws snapped at him before the creature decided against taking on a larger opponent and wisely scampered away, kicking up a spray of sand in its wake. Squinting in the brilliant sunlight, he could make out the almost phosphorescent glow of a wide expanse of beach, stretching away from him to a darkly wooded forest of tangled trees and brush. Taking stock of himself, he found that he was mostly intact, with all limbs and senses accounted for, although his clothing had been reduced to tatters. By what, he had to wonder. He searched his recent memory for the reason why he was lying on his stomach with seaweed in his mane and sand in his eyes on a beach in the middle of nowhere.

The return of the memory brought forth a groan of part despair, part relief. He gained recall of the struggle with the Mutants, which caused his fall into the rapids that had carried him down the swollen river to the swirling waters of the Whirlpool of Infinity. He remembered vague glances of Vultureman and the others following his progress along the raging torrent and suppressed the urge to question why they had not finished him off when they had the chance. The whirlpool, of course, he thought. They would believe that he had been dragged down to his death by the ferocious currents to languish for all eternity in a watery grave. Certainly, he had believed it himself when the bubbles and choking waters closed over his head and the irresistible grip of the whirlpool pulled him down into its black heart. In the few moments of clarity left to him, he had seen his life flash before his eyes. His last desperate thoughts had been of the woman he loved and the daughter he feared he would never see grow to adulthood. Thoughts of his family were the only thing at the time that kept his fears about being in the water at all from beckoning a panic that could have done him in long before the whirlpool got a hold of him. The wild ride in the river rapids and the whirlpool was over with merciful speed, and the next he knew he was here – wherever that was. It certainly wasn't the Astral Plain as expected, where he would have been greeted by friends, family and Jaga. No, this was definitely an earth-bound beach, with nothing but the lapping surf, wildlife and scorching sun as his welcoming committee. That left the distinct, if patently unbelievable, possibility that he was still alive – alone, albeit, but alive. At least that also meant no Mutants were around or they surely would have pounced on him while he lay helpless on the beach.

The downfall, Tygra knew, was that if the Mutants left him for dead then it was likely everyone else would assume the same. In the normal run of things, it was impossible that he should have survived, so he could hardly blame them for such an assumption. The currents would have kept his body under long after he should have drowned and never to surrender its prize. He had never delved into it too closely, but he always supposed it was called the Whirlpool of Infinity for a good reason. It made no sense at all, but then, this was Third Earth, where normal was the exception rather than the rule. Whatever had happened in that whirlpool had delivered him to this beach alive, tormented by a cluster of flies humming about his head and rapidly being soaked by the incoming water. That influx of water prompted the primal fear in Tygra again, and he knew he must force himself to move to get out of the dreaded water as well as seek some shelter from the elements.

Putting aside his incredulity, he exerted incredible effort to slowly push himself up to his hands and knees. Bruises he was not aware of earlier suddenly made themselves known and made his battered body creak with pain. Gritting his teeth, he made a supreme effort and got to his feet. His legs trembled but still managed to support his weight. His back was stiff with the beginnings of sunburn and his throat was parched. Wondering just how much seawater he had ingested, he glanced about and saw a gully cut into the sand some way along the beach by a freshwater spring running out from the forest. He made his way over to it, taking his time to allow his body time to adjust to an upright existence once more, and finally sank down beside the sparkling stream. The waters were cool and wonderfully fresh, a tonic to a thirsty body and soul. Handfuls went over his head and down his body, washing away the clinging sand and tangy smell of the ocean. It dribbled a salty mixture down his back, torturing his raw flesh, and into his eyes, making him blink and wince from the sting of it.

That decided it, he thought. He was alive. This was no illusion created by his wandering mind or game played by the denizens of the Astral Plain. The heat of the sun, the feel of the sand, the assorted aches and twinges of his body, all too tangible to be anything but reality. Somehow, he survived the whirlpool and had been carried far away from home to this place, wherever this might be. An island paradise in the midst of a sparkling azure ocean with fresh water for him to drink and fruit-laden trees to satisfy his hunger, which meant he could at least survive there for some time while he waited to be rescued – that is, assuming rescue would ever be attempted. Tygra tried not to think about the irony of surviving the whirlpool, only to be sentenced to existence without his family and friends. His beloved Cheetara and Velouria were out there somewhere. They would be worried and were probably out there now, braving Mutants and the dangers of the forest, looking for him. What's worse was he never did get to warn them about what the Mutants were up to in the forest, so it was possible they could fall victim as he had to Vultureman's latest toy – if the scavenger happened to retrieve the item from where he'd managed to fling it in the jungle – and that thought frightened Tygra more than facing a lonely existence in this tropical paradise.

For the time being, however, there was little practical use in tormenting himself with doubts and worries. He toyed with the idea of trying to concentrate his mental powers to send a message to Cheetara in the hopes her sixth sense would at least tell them he's alive and not to give up. But he was far too taxed to make an attempt now. He had to trust that the Sword of Omens, as his kind have for centuries, and hope it would show Lion-O where he was and that rescue would come,

sooner or later. Being therefore a practical cat, building some sort of shelter was next on his immediate to-do list. The forest was dark and gloomy beyond its sunlit edge and, given his weakened state, he was unwilling to venture too far into it in case he met something large and hungry for an unwary tiger.

"If only I had my whip," he bemoaned under his breath, his voice sounding haggard and almost foreign to his own ears. Invisibility would have been a keen advantage to have in this unfamiliar habitat.

Much of what he needed was found on the beach and so he contented himself with making walls of driftwood and a roof of feathery fronds from the tall, hairy-trunked trees that populated the forest. The process was a slow and painful one, but if he were to survive to see a rescue, he had to persevere. There would be time to rest when the work was done. To keep his mind off his physical pains, he tried to analyze his surroundings as he worked, keeping his mind occupied with thoughts and theories. He noted the trees were so different from the type of hardwoods that surrounded Cat's Lair that it made him wonder just how far from home the currents had carried him and how difficult that would make it for the others to find him.

Pushing that thought firmly aside and more than a little miffed his sidetracking himself with thought backfired, he had more immediate concerns when the roof of his hut came crashing down under the weight of too many fronds. What were needed, he decided, were some sturdy rafters to hold them up. Several branches formed the beginning of a platform and he had to widen his search to find more. About eight hundred yards from his new home, he came across something that was alien to its surroundings. It reflected the sun straight into his eyes when he approached and defied him to pull it from its resting-place. When he did, he found it was a piece of chromium metal, so highly polished that it gleamed like a mirror. One edge was smooth and pierced for rivets, while the other was bent and torn as though it had been sheared from a much larger sheet.

Deciding that any piece of scrap might come in useful, he was about to retrace his steps along the beach when he found one of the missing rivets. A tiny bead of blood welled up when he pulled it from the sole of his foot and with a muttered curse, he threw the offending piece rivet into the forest. It made a dull clang as it landed, alerting him to the presence of yet more metal. With nothing more pressing to do, he followed a trail of debris while fighting off the array of insects and other bugs that found the shade inviting as well as his flesh. However, this discovery of modern machinery on such a remote area of Third Earth urged Tygra on and by late afternoon he accumulated a collection of assorted parts, including a wheel, struts, glass and jigsaw-pieces of metal. All would have been nothing more than flotsam if not for his discovery of something more immediately identifiable.

Scattered glass had led him to a ridge of metal that stuck up a few inches from the sand. A good half-hour of digging, with his aching body fuelled by an adrenaline boost, revealed it to be a section of a suspension capsule and, after deeper probing, he found the lid. When he brushed the sand away and found the Thundercat insignia, the breath caught in his throat and almost choked him. That the capsule was open and intact meant that the person inside had survived and had been gone long enough for the sea and the sand to claim this chance find for their own. The implication

was staggering. He had not been the first Thunderian to come to these shores. The question was, he thought, scanning the empty beach, where were they now?



The atmosphere in the Sword Chamber was tense enough without Snarf's continued twittering about how dangerous it all was and, despite her best efforts to contain her impatience, Cheetara found herself snapping and silencing him with a few choice words. Snarf bridled, protesting that he'd only been trying to help and then slunk away, murmuring unhappily to himself about making himself useful by checking on Velouria.

"He means well, you know," said Lion-O, his voice cutting through the noise of her mind.

Cheetara sighed. "Yes, I know he does. But he's not helping today."

Lion-O nodded. "He was making me nervous too, as if I'm not already. Still," he said, drawing in a deep breath, "it's a risk I'm willing to take. Tygra is my friend and a Thundercat. If there's a chance he's out there somewhere, I have to try to find him."

A slim chance, Cheetara thought despondently. Long after the sun had deserted the sky, she continued to seek for any trace of Tygra's psychic presence until her head ached from the strain of it but, found nothing. Any number of reasons could account for her inability to find him, from his unconsciousness to her agitated state of mind, but logic was telling her that he was dead. Without his whip, he was helpless in water. His injured state, as well as being weakened by Thundranium, traces of which Panthro had found at the site of the attack, meant that any chance he had of saving himself would have been halved. Add to that what the others had been reluctant to tell her about the trail of footprints that followed the course of the river until they stopped and turned away by the Whirlpool of Infinity and she was almost certain that the Mutants had stood by and watched him drown. Had there been any chance of his survival, they would have never let him go. And there had also been no sign that anyone climbed – or was pulled up – the banks of the river and out of the water. They'd combed both sides of the river exhaustively and double-checked for good measure. Everything pointed to Tygra being dead and yet she refused to accept it. Logic was a fine thing, but her gut was telling her otherwise and at her insistence Lion-O was about to attempt something that could risk all their lives.

The door opened and Felina came in, carrying a bundle in her arms. She glanced at the two waiting occupants of the room, managed a less than reassuring smile and made her way over to the sword stand. Placing the bundle down, she carefully peeled back the layers to reveal the Book of Omens.

"There," she said. "I brought it as you asked." She extended her hand to him, which held a golden key. "Definitely don't forget this."

"Thanks," said Lion-O, taking the Key from her. "You should go now. This could be dangerous."

"After what happened last time, you mean?" Felina saw his slight nod and gave a small snort. "If it's all the same to you, I'd rather stay. I know more about the Book than anyone and, if anything happens, I might be able to help. Besides," she added, resting her hand on Cheetara's arm, "I want to find out what happened to Tygra, too."

Cheetara gave her a grateful smile. "I appreciate this, Felina."

"Well, once I start just don't get too close. Last time Kit did that when Mumm-Ra went inside the Book, she got sucked right in with him. It's just lucky she ended up in the same place where I could find her," said Lion-O, taking up the Sword of Omens.

"Wait!" Panthro rounded the doorway and strode determinedly into the room. "Not without me you don't. And don't try and put me off with any of that danger nonsense. I want to find Tygra as much as anyone." He stood firmly in the centre of the room, arms folded, defying them to move him.

Lion-O sighed and shook his head. "Very well, since we're all here, I'll proceed. As we already know, the magnetic field caused by the Thundranium discharge blocked the Sword's powers. The hope is that maybe the Guardian of the Book of Omens will tell me what happened to Tygra."

"Maybe?" Panthro queried. "I thought that book of tricks could do anything, if you had the Key."

"A lot of things concerning the Book were long studied but rarely put into practice. I'm still simply a student of the writings – I don't even have the full scope of knowledge about it to be able to guarantee anything. True, Lion-O and I had some success before using the Book but there's always risk involved when you play with that kind of combined, unbridled power such as you get when the Sword, Key and Book are all used together," explained Felina. "As Mumm-Ra found out, great power never comes without a cost."

"What kind of risk are we talking about?"

She shrugged lightly. "We could all be sucked into the Book with him and end up who knows where doing who knows what, with nobody who knows how to get us out of it."

Panthro cleared his throat. "That's what I like to hear, confidence."

"Which is why I'd prefer you not to be here," said Lion-O. "I can always call to the Sword and get myself out in a pinch. If you're not where I am, I don't know how you'd manage or how I'd find you. You wouldn't have the Key and the Sword won't respond to any of you."

"I'm staying," said Panthro resolutely, "for Cheetara."

"You don't have to," she said quietly.

His arm went around her shoulders to give a comforting squeeze. "We'll find him," he said. "Then I'm slapping water wings on that fool tiger of yours and teaching him how to swim if it's the last thing I do." She managed a weak smile and he grinned back. "Lion-O will find him, don't worry."

"I know he will," she said, "alive… or dead." Most of her dread about Lion-O's going into the Book stemmed from the fact that it might dash all hope and they'd know beyond a shadow of a doubt Tygra was gone – she feared the finality of it. But then, she supposed, they would then have closure and may even be able to retrieve his body and give it a proper resting place.

"Then let's get on with it," said Lion-O, raising the hilt of the Sword to his eyes. The trio left behind stepped back instinctively as Lion-O was surrounded in a glowing blue aura and swept inside the magical tome. The Sword clattered to the floor when all was done, and nobody made a move to pick it up as if afraid some adverse result would occur to either Lion-O or themselves.

In fact, the three cats that remained seemed scared to breathe as the minutes ticked by. Cheetara wrung her hands nervously, wondering what could be keeping him – it was just a simple question, she reasoned. Cheetara couldn't decide if the time issue was a good omen or a bad one. She was barely aware of Panthro and Felina on either side of her showing their support as the wait dragged on.

Finally, the Sword shot up from the floor and met the Book in mid-air, which caused everyone in the room to jump a little at the suddenness of it all. Seconds later, Lion-O was tossed in a graceless heap on the floor, the Book and Sword tumbling down behind him. Lion-O still had a tight grip on the Key, as if his life yet depended on having the object in his possession.

Cheetara could hardly stand it as she waited for Lion-O to get his senses about him and speak. She occupied her mind with quelling the sudden urge she felt to throw up. She didn't want to know, and yet she *had* to know at the same time.

Felina went to kneel by Lion-O's side and asked what Cheetara wanted to ask herself. "Well? What did you find out?"

Lion-O looked first at Felina, and then up at Cheetara and Panthro. Cheetara's heart skipped a beat when she failed to read anything meaningful in his expression, and she feared she wouldn't be able to stand one more second of suspense.

Lion-O held Cheetara's gaze unflinchingly as he spoke. "He's alive."

Cheetara's breath left her in a rush, signifying her relief. She smiled and gladly welcomed Panthro's embrace at the news.

"Did you find out where he is then?" Felina pressed, while helping the Thundercat Lord to his feet.

“Yes, the Guardian showed me. But I’ll need a map.”

Panthro rushed away to get one, leaving Cheetara and Felina to question Lion-O about this revelation. Cheetara hated herself for thinking it was all too good to be true.

"But we determined he went into the whirlpool," said Felina, giving voice to Cheetara’s own doubts. "I don't mean to upset anyone, but how could he have survived that?"

"It's a vortex," said Lion-O.

"Obviously."

"Like a wormhole in space. It sucked him in and transported him to another place on Third Earth."

"Where?" asked Cheetara.

"Somewhere in the southern ocean. On an island."

Felina's mouth dropped open. "But that's over fifty miles away."

"I know," he agreed, as Panthro returned, bearing a folded sheet. He spread it out and Lion-O indicated a small dot of green in the blue sea. "He's there," he said with confidence. "Can we reach him in the Thundertank?"

Panthro grinned. "And be home in time for breakfast. Let's go."

Out in the corridor, WilyKit and WilyKat were waiting anxiously for news. Their faces flushed with relief when Lion-O told them that Tygra had been found, only to disappoint them when he said they were to stay behind at the Lair.

"But why do we always have to keep watch?" WilyKit wailed, as the pair trailed them to the Thundertank. "It's not fair!"

"It's a big responsibility, you know," said Felina. "Lion-O has a lot of faith in you two."

"He does?" said WilyKat.

Felina nodded, winking slyly at Lion-O as the Thunderkittens fell into her trap. "He doesn't trust *me* to stay, does he?"

"No," WilyKit said thoughtfully, "but he does take you with him."

"Because he thinks I can't look after myself."

The kittens exchanged glances and nodded. "We won't let you down," said WilyKit, waving them goodbye. "You can rely on us."

"We won't be gone long," said Lion-O.

"Keep an eye on Velouria for me," said Cheetara. "She should be all right, but if she starts crying, you might need to change her or feed her, in which case there's bottles in the fridge, or--"

"Do you want to stay here?" Panthro interrupted her.

"No."

"They've babysat before. I'm sure they haven't forgotten what to do."

"Snarf taught them well," the fuzzy creature declared as he prepared to join the departing group.

Panthro couldn't argue with that. "Let's get this show on the road."

"Right," said Lion-O. "Thunderkittens, be careful."

"You too," called WilyKat as the Thundertank pulled out of the Lair. "And bring Tygra home!"

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"Birdbrain!"

Vultureman ducked just in time as a plate whizzed past his ear. Slithe's temper was fierce at the best of times and his mood had not improved when he was told of his fellow Mutants' antics by the river. Vultureman expected his pride to be wounded, but this anger was coming from somewhere else.

"Caw, what's the matter, Slithe?" he said. "Jealous because I succeeded where you have failed all these years?"

Slithe snorted, causing a bubble of nasal fluid to dribble out of his nose. "Succeeded, you?" he sneered. "This Thundercat you've supposedly killed--"

"He *is* dead."

"Really? Then where's the body?"

Vultureman narrowed his eyes. What did that stupid reptilian want now? Proof? From a *whirlpool*? "We saw him swept into the Whirlpool of Infinity. He drowned."

Slithe waved a disdainful hand. "That proves nothing. If these years have taught me anything, Vultureman, it's never to assume. How many times have we thought we had the Thundercats in our grasp only to be thwarted?"

Too many, Vultureman thought, though he'd get assaulted by a thousand plates before he'd vocally agree with Slithe when he's raging. "So?"

Slithe sat back in his chair and curled his lip in dislike. "You've made a fatal mistake, my feathered friend, yesss. While you were out celebrating, the Thundercats left the Lair just before midnight in a hurry. Where d'you think they were going?"

Vultureman felt his beak drop open. "No, it's - it's impossible. He couldn't have survived."

"And I ask again, where's the body?"

"He was sucked into that infernal whirlpool and disappeared, Slithe. I assumed--" He checked himself, realising he was using Slithe's own words to damn himself. "It doesn't matter whether Tygra is dead or alive. We can still turn this to our advantage and ambush the Thundercats while they are vulnerable. I need to go back to that jungle and find my device…"

"There's no time for that now, fool," said Slithe, pushing his bulk up from his seat. "Get those other two blithering idiots and prepare my Nosediver. Make sure Grune isn't around this time either. The last thing we need is that death-warmed-over hulk of a Thunderian bossing us around again. And Vultureman..."

He turned just as Slithe hurled another plate at his head. This time his aim was better and Vultureman was left with the remains of Slithe's dinner dripping from his beak.

Slithe smirked. "That'll teach you to go behind my back. Remember who's in charge here, yesss!"

"Yes, Slithe," Vultureman replied with great loathing, as he wiped the remnants of food off his face. He wasn't sure who he loathed more – that self-righteous reptile or himself for being such a fool. He left to do as told, cursing his rotten luck the whole time.

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WilyKat hurtled from the Lair's Control Room, yelling for his sister. She heard him but did not heed his call. She was tired, having finally managed to get Velouria back to sleep after the

baby cried relentlessly for over an hour. Kit went down the list of usual suspects for a fussy baby – changed a diaper, tried a bottle, and paced about patting the infant's back in a vain effort to elicit a troublesome bubble of gas – all of which made little difference.

Velouria had craved attention and only when WilyKit took her in her arms and wandered about the Lair with her, talking and singing lullabies all the while, did she finally close her eyes and fall silent. And now WilyKat was about to undo all her good work and wake Velouria up again with his shouting. It was inevitable, but she wanted to keep the peace for a few moments more, so she stayed where she was in the nursery and let him come to her. And just when she was thinking about trying to carefully set the baby in her crib and sneak out, too! She didn't know where the phrase "sleep like a baby" came from, for she'd found since Velouria's arrival that babies were extremely easy to wake up. Or maybe it just seemed that way when she was the one on diaper duty and needed sleep herself.

He finally burst into the room, red of face and wild of eye. "There's trouble," he panted. "Why didn't you answer when I called?"

WilyKit indicated the sleeping baby in her arms, who was now stirring and flinching a bit thanks to WilyKat's big mouth. "And because you always over-react, WilyKat. What sort of trouble?" She kept her voice at a soft level in the thin hope that it was nothing pressing, and the baby would still slumber when the faux crisis was over.

He squirmed under her criticism. "Well, it might be nothing..."

"Tell me!" she said impatiently.

"I was checking the long-range scanners," he explained. "Slithe and the other Mutants left Castle Plun-darr about ten minutes ago. Well, I didn't think anything of it, but when I tracked them, I discovered that they were following the course the Thundertank took."

"Why didn't you say so sooner?" WilyKit said, jumping up from her chair, no longer taking pains not to stir Velouria. "Have you warned Lion-O?"

"Couldn't get an answer," said WilyKat. "They're out of range."

"Then we have to go after them," she said decisively. "The Thundercats might need our help."

"But what about the Lair?"

"It'll be all right. We know that the Mutants won't be coming here any time soon and Mumm-Ra's still out of commission from his little time travelling venture."

WilyKat looked doubtful. "And Velouria?"

"We'll take her with us. Snarf made a baby-carrier for her that he straps on his back. We'll take it in turns." Still her brother hesitated. "You go and get our boards. I'll get Velouria ready."

"But Panthro said--"

"He said to guard the Lair, but do you think he wants to get ambushed by Mutants when we know they're coming?"

She turned on her most winning smile and his doubts melted away.

"Will do, WilyKit," he said. "But --?"

"Mutants already have a head start on us, Kat. I don't think we should waste time debating any longer. She's too little to be left alone. We'll have to risk it and hope we don't get detected before we can warn the others."

Convinced, he darted away, leaving WilyKit grinning in his wake. She liked to be in the action and well, Velouria was a Thundercat too – she might as well get used to it. "Come on, Velouria," she said to the baby in her arms, "we're going on an adventure!"

Velouria, who was now quite awake but at least not fussing, looked up at Kit with wide amber eyes before cooing and breaking into a grin that melted Kit's heart.



Long before the Thundertank hit dry land again, Felina was ready to throw herself overboard. Panthro's driving left much to be desired at the best of times, but under water he was worse. A straight course seemed to elude him, and she was sure he had gone out of his way to hit every outcrop of rock and coral. Once, the tank had plummeted into a gully and she held onto her seat and prayed that they would hit the ground long before they reached the centre of Third Earth. Panthro had activated the claws and the tank thudded into the rocky wall with a force that made her teeth rattle. It had been an ordeal, and no one was quicker than she was in jumping out when they finally emerged from the sea into the watery light of dawn.

"Well, here we are, at last," she said. "Any ideas where Tygra might be?"

"How about over there?" said Panthro, pointing to a thin plume of grey smoke marring the yellow sky.

"Looks promising," said Lion-O. "Cheetara, I think we should--" He let the question drop as a fierce rush of air and flying sand told of her departure in the direction of the smoke before his eyes ever detected it. "How did I know she was going to do that?" he said.

"Can you blame her?" Felina said. "She's worried about him."

"We all are," he said tersely. "All the same, a little caution is needed. We don't know if this island is inhabited or if they'll be pleased to see strangers. It's unexplored territory."

A nasty thought struck her. "You don't think...?" she gasped.

Lion-O shook his head. "The Guardian didn't show me any reason to believe that Tygra was in any immediate danger here."

"Oh, that's all right then," said Felina with measured relief. "By the way, what you did, with the Sword and the Book, that was brave, considering what happened before."

"It was the least I could do. Tygra is my friend."

"And you'd do anything for a friend?"

Lion-O gave her a quizzical look. "Of course. I'd do the same if any of the Thundercats were in trouble." He paused and Felina felt a twinge of disappointment that he had not been more specific. She chided herself for being so silly, given his statement covered everyone, including her. But she just wanted to hear it from him just once – something specific, a sentiment expressed just for her. This desire had increased ever since Panthro blurted what he had back when they were all together in the Treetop Kingdom recovering from the flood, all but spelling it out to Lion-O how she felt about him. But reciprocation wasn't going to happen today, it seemed. She'd never considered that she'd end up falling for him but face the possibility that he wouldn't return the feeling in kind. But then, given her parents' tangled situation, she also knew it wasn't an impossible scenario for love to be a one-sided venture. Just when Felina didn't think anything could get more awkward between them, somehow circumstances conspired to achieve just that.

He simply offered her a brief smile before turning back to Panthro. "Can you catch up with Cheetara?" he asked.

Panthro shook his head. "The Tank took a beating on that last reef. Looks like it's done her undercarriage some damage."

This didn't surprise Felina in the least, and she bit her tongue to keep from rattling off a smart comment to that affect. At least Panthro got all of them there in one piece.

"Brrr, what about my undercarriage?" grumbled Snarf, rubbing his behind, apparently having no such reservations about smarting off. "Weeow, where did you learn to drive, Panthro?"

"We got here, didn't we?" he said gruffly. "Quit complaining, Snarf."

"It's all very well for you," Snarf said huffily, "but I'm nearer to the ground than you guys. Ugh, this sand gets everywhere."

"That's true," said Panthro. "I'll have to keep an eye on my leg. The last thing I need is to seize up with grit in my joints. At least the good one healed well. That's something."

"Do what you can," said Lion-O. "We'll go after Cheetara and find Tygra. Meet us when you can."

With that, he set off at a run in the direction Cheetara had gone. Felina trailed behind his blistering pace and was out of breath by the time she spied Cheetara in the distance. The downside of getting back into her studies was that meant a lot of time sitting and not a lot of time staying active.

She found Tygra and the pair locked in an embrace, grateful beyond words that they were reunited. Lion-O slowed his pace to give them a moment longer together and Felina fell in step beside him. She said nothing and didn't even risk a sidelong glance at Lion-O, afraid the relationship envy would show on her face. What struck Felina as the ridiculous part is she would have been fine had the marriage never taken place, she was sure of it. But now she had all these expectations and longings – which their couplings only intensified - and she didn't know how to sort it all out.

By the time they finally joined the pair, Cheetara and Tygra were waiting for them and smiling warmly.

"Good to see you," said Lion-O. "You had us worried."

Tygra patted Cheetara's hand. "So, I hear. I'm all right. Never so glad to see you though – and so soon!"

While he swapped tales with Lion-O over the events that had brought him to this island, Felina noticed how weary and drawn he seemed. His face was pale, and dark circles hung under his eyes. She could tell from the solicitous way that Cheetara regarded him that she too sensed all was not well with the tiger.

"Well, we should get back," said Lion-O at last. "We left the Thunderkittens in charge. Who knows what state the Lair will be in?"

"Before we do," said Tygra, "there's something you have to see."

He turned and started away up the beach, only to trip and stumble. Cheetara caught him before he fell and carefully helped him to sit down.

"I knew you weren't well," she said with concern. "What's wrong?"

He shook his head. "It's nothing."

"You're burning up," she said, feeling his brow.

"Probably sunstroke," said Snarf. "I think we've got something for that in the Thundertank's medical kit."

"I'll go get it," Felina offered, but Tygra stopped her.

"Really, I'm fine," he said. "I'm a lot better than I was last night. It's almost gone, whatever it was. Help me up." He took Lion-O's hand and with a grunt of effort got to his feet. "There, I'm feeling better already. Now, follow me."

He led the way along the beach to what looked to Felina like a collection of junk and broken metal. Tygra began to sort through the assorted debris and, pushing a large chunk of metal aside, he gestured for Lion-O to take a look.

"A Thunderian suspension capsule," he said. "But what's it doing here?"

The three Thundercats speculated, but Felina said nothing. Her thoughts were with the others who had saved her from the burning wreck of Thundera. She still remembered them - Bengali, Pumyra and Lynx-O - usually in her dreams, when their faces would resurface and play their part in the events of those last frantic moments before their escape. She had never told the others of their courage that night, had never mentioned them at all in fact. She supposed that they had died like Ocelia, their suspension capsules breaking open in mid-air to fling them to the unyielding earth below. But what if they survived? She had, after all, so why couldn't it be possible? Why had she assumed she was the only one? The suspension capsule was proof enough that someone had and suddenly she felt a pang of guilt for never having thought to look for them. So wrapped up in her own trials and travails, she'd forgotten the ones who'd saved her in the first place.

The sudden awareness that the others were looking in her direction made her start. "What?" she said, a bit more defensively than she'd intended for her own guilt made their glances seem accusatory to her.

"I only asked if you had any idea who it might have been," Lion-O said.

"Why should I?" she said, once again in a defensive tone.

He looked slightly taken aback. "Because you came to Third Earth in a suspension capsule. I wondered if there were others on the ship."

She shrugged. "Possibly. I don't know."

"Right." He gave her an uncertain look, and she quickly averted her eyes. She didn't feel like getting into it now and facing all their questions. Although she knew they'd have to try to find them and so she'd have to say something eventually. She only hoped they had survived all this time and that her silence hadn't already cost them dearly. "Well, chances are they might still be here. We should look for them."

"I've already thought of that," said Tygra. "There's no one else here. This island isn't that big. But I did find something interesting."

Felina trailed behind feeling thoroughly wretched as Tygra led the way into the forest, stopping every now and then to point to a tree stump. She did her best to ignore the pointed and curious glances Lion-O cast back in her direction every now and then, and she knew he had to be wondering about her sudden change in mood.

Tygra came to a halt in a clearing and picked something up. It was an axe, crudely made, with a branch for a handle and a piece of bent metal for the blade.

"There's a few of these I found," he said. "It looks like they made a raft and sailed away."

"'They'?" Lion-O queried, turning the axe over in his hand.

"There's only so many tools one person can use," Tygra explained. "Plus, the number of trees cut down suggest that it was quite a large raft, possibly to accommodate several people."

Three people in fact, Felina thought. What to the others was a mystery was for her only reaffirming her renewed belief that the three people who had risked their own lives to save her survived. This wasn't merely a case of some more random Thunderians who got off course and also found themselves marooned on Third Earth. No, she felt they should have known long ago about these particular survivors if Felina hadn't merely written them off. She looked around the tiny island and tried to imagine how long they must have languished here before moving on.

"Where would they have gone?" said Cheetara. "They could be anywhere on Third Earth."

"We'll have to find out," said Lion-O. "It won't be easy. We could check some current charts to determine where they may have drifted to or use the Sword or Book. Something. They're our countrymen. We owe them the effort."

Tygra nodded emphatically, and Felina could stand it no longer. If they were angry with her or thought her stupid for not speaking up before now, then so be it. She sucked in a deep breath, about to confess all when she was denied the chance.

Cheetara held up her hand for silence. "Do you hear that?" she hissed.

Lion-O cocked his head to one side and listened intently. "Sounds like an engine," he said. "In fact, it sounds like a Skycutter! Come on!"

The edge of the forest was already ablaze by the time they retraced their steps. Against the blue sky, two Skycutters wheeled around and rained down fire on the island. On the beach, Panthro was weaving the Thundertank between a volley of energy bolts and was rapidly driven into the inferno of blazing trees.

"I'll draw their fire," said Lion-O. "Tygra, Cheetara, circle round behind them and take them by surprise. Felina, go with them."

"What about you?" she called after him, as he charged through the burning bushes and out onto the beach. Cheetara and Tygra set off in the other direction and for a moment she was torn between going with them, as Lion-O had told her, or helping him.

The Mutants already altered course and were drilling deep furrows in the sand with a relentless barrage. She caught her breath as they ploughed towards Lion-O and was only able to breathe again when he deflected their fire with the Sword of Omens. Jackalman and Monkian had to swerve violently to avoid the redirected bolts and the two Skycutters scraped the beach in a flurry of yelps and curses. No sooner had they started to rise again than Cheetara sped out of the forest with a creeper, which she threw around both Skycutters' noses and brought them down. They had the situation well in hand, Felina decided, and her attention turned instead to the Thundertank. Smoke was pouring from its rear and above the din she thought she could hear Panthro shouting for help.

She dashed from the cover of the forest and out to the Thundertank. Inside the smoky front compartment, Panthro was thumping the roof, trying to open it. Between coughs, he was able to point her to the external release mechanism. She yanked the panel away and found a small lever. For a few anxious moments, it refused to budge. Then, slowly, it gave up the unequal battle and she heaved on it until Panthro had enough room to escape.

"Thanks," he said, gasping for breath. "I owe you one."

"Glad to help." He coughed again and she slapped him on the back to help clear his lungs. "Where did they come from?"

"Must have followed us. Typical of Slithe."

"Slithe?" said Felina. "But he's not here."

Panthro stared at her and suddenly his attention switched to something just over her left shoulder. The next she knew he threw her to the ground and dropped down beside her. The Tank rocked under the force of a small explosion and a second later the Nosediver roared over their heads. Felina caught a glimpse of Slithe's beady eyes and leering grin as he turned his vehicle and prepared to fire. To her horror, she realised that they were trapped between him and the Thundertank. Panthro was still winded and he was too heavy to carry, but she could not leave him. Grabbing him round the waist, she tried to haul him out of the way as Slithe drew nearer and his forward cannon spat an energy bolt. Fiery death hurtled towards her. Almost at the last minute a flash of red and blue jumped in front of her. Lion-O took the bolt on the Claw Shield and retaliated with the Sword of Omens. Slithe blazed a smoking trail into the ocean and landed with a satisfying splash.

"You all right?" Lion-O asked.

Felina nodded.

"Panthro?"

He gave a weak cough. "I'm getting too old for this nonsense," he muttered. "Damn Mutants."

Cheetara and Tygra wandered over to join them and stood looking at dismay at the Thundertank.

"It's only cosmetic," said Panthro, by way of reassurance. "She's fireproof."

"But you're not," Cheetara chided him. "Why do you take risks like that?"

"Hey, you can boss Tygra about, but not me. Speaking of which..." He reached inside the front compartment and took out Tygra's bolo whip. "You lose something?"

Tygra caught it and nodded gratefully. "Thought I'd lost this for good."

"Be more careful next time. I'm not here to tidy up after you."

"Panthro, you're all heart," said Cheetara.

Their laughter was cut short by a sudden screech as Vultureman appeared from behind the trees in his Flying Machine. Fire raked across the beach, making them scatter. Felina found herself heading straight into the Mutant's line of fire and had to double back as the sand exploded all around her. She ran blindly into Lion-O's waiting arms and he pulled her behind the Thundertank, away from the deadly fire. Vultureman flew over, yelling abuse and vowing to get them yet. Too busy with them, he did not see the thin lash that snagged one of his landing struts. Only when his Flying Machine began to circle out of his control did he realise what had happened. He descended into a thicket of trees and the cloud of dust that followed his disappearance told that he had been forced to make an impromptu landing.

The threat was gone, yet Felina found that she was still in Lion-O's arms. He stared into her eyes, on the verge of saying something. She smiled encouragingly, hoping he would translate words into action, and was pleased when he inclined his head ever so slightly towards hers. With his lips inches from hers, he hesitated, and in that instant Tygra and Cheetara rounded the Thundertank, wanting to know if they were injured. The moment was lost and Lion-O relinquished his hold on her and instead helped her to her feet.

"We're fine," Lion-O reassured them. "Good work, Tygra."

For her part, Felina put far too much focus into brushing the sand from her skirt.

"I have to do something to earn my keep," he joked.

"Now can we go home?" said Cheetara.

"Soon," said Panthro. "Wait up. I think we've got more visitors."

Shielding his eyes from the sun, he pointed out to sea, where two small dots were growing larger by the second. A few minutes later, two breathless Thunderkittens had landed on the beach and were running towards them.

"What are you doing here?" Lion-O asked.

"We came to warn you that the Mutants were following you," said WilyKat. “We couldn’t get you on the communicator.” His gaze fell upon the Thundertank. "Are we too late?"

"Just. I appreciate the gesture, but you shouldn't have left the Lair."

"Who's looking after Velouria?" Cheetara said.

"She's here," said WilyKit, handing the child over to her mother. "She's all right."

Cheetara gazed fondly at her slumbering daughter. "She certainly is. I haven't seen her sleeping this peacefully for a while."

"She likes to be on the move. And the faster we went, the more she seemed to like it."

"So, I see," he said reprovingly.

"Well, no harm done," said Lion-O. He winced and slapped his upper arm. "Where have these mosquitoes come from?" he grumbled.

"There's a nest of them in the forest," said Snarf, wending his way from the undergrowth. "They're harmless enough."

"You reckon? I'm being eaten alive here."

A tickle on her shoulder told Felina that she, too, had been targeted. A small red winged insect prepared to suck her blood. Her hand came down on it and flattened it before it had a chance to pierce her skin. They were a nuisance, that was certain.

"Between Mutants and mosquitoes, I've had enough of this place," said Lion-O. "Let's hurry up and get home before anything else happens."



Much to everyone's general relief, Panthro chose a less bumpy route home, although as she sat in the back of the Tank with Lion-O, Tygra and Cheetara – and the now-alert Velouria – Felina's relief was short-lived. She knew she had to tell them what she knew.

"I have something to confess," Felina announced, causing all eyes to focus upon her.

Tygra looked as if he was about to drift off to sleep until her announcement perked him back to wakefulness. "What's on your mind, Felina?" he pressed.

"It's about that capsule on the island," she said while grabbing some of the material from her skirt and wringing it nervously. She cast Lion-O a fleeting glance as he leaned forward in his seat and peered at her, ready to take in what she had to say. She swallowed hard before going on. "There were others on the ship with me besides the pilots when we left Thundera. It could be possible they did in fact survive as I did."

Lion-O's brow wrinkled. "Felina, why wouldn't you say something back there when I asked you?"

Though he looked more baffled than annoyed, Felina still felt he was displeased with her. "I don't know. I felt stupid for forgetting to mention them before, I guess," she finished meekly.

"How many were there?" Cheetara asked gently. Felina was grateful for her lack of judgment.

"Three Thunderian citizens. Bengali, Pumyra and Lynx-O are their names. The oldest one, the lynx – he was blinded by debris before we left," Felina answered, trying to spill every detail she could recall as fast as she could in hopes it would help. "They were the ones who actually saved me after the Flagship left. I wouldn't have ever made it off Thundera without them, or the ship that doubled back for us. We were put into capsules after a meteor shower damaged our ship, and in that dream I had about the Key, I saw the pilots – I saw them die when their capsules flew apart when we hit the atmosphere, disintegrating our ship. And I just assumed…" She trailed off shrugging sheepishly.

Tygra offered a reassuring smile. "Don't worry. We'll find them after we rest up. You've been very helpful."

Felina nodded, though she avoided chancing another glance at Lion-O who seemed to be choosing to digest the information in silence. The confession freed her conscious enough to feel the fatigue of the night's adventure hit her, and she was able to close her eyes to get some much-needed sleep the rest of the way home.

By the time she awoke, they were back at the Lair. The Thunderkittens had already dashed away and Tygra and Cheetara were on their way upstairs with Velouria. Left alone, Felina yawned and stretched her stiff back, pleased that the journey was over. Jumping out of the Tank, she landed beside Lion-O and happened to brush his arm.

"Wow, you're hot," she said in surprise.

"I feel it," he said. "Must be the weather."

The day was sunny and warm, but not enough to produce the sweat she could see glistening on his face.

"Lion-O, you're running a high temperature," she said. "You might be coming down with something. Why don't you go to bed and get some rest?"

"No, I've got things to do."

Snarf stepped in. "Weeow, Lion-O, Felina is right. Off to bed with you and old Snarf will bring you up something to make you feel better."

He was about to protest, but instead closed his eyes and swayed slightly on his feet. "Perhaps I will," he murmured. "I don't feel so good."

Felina took his arm and gently guided him from the hangar. They were almost to the door when Lion-O suddenly let out a mighty roar and, pushing her aside, spun around, Sword in hand, yelling something about Mumm-ra. The Sword sprang to life and a bright beam of energy crackled from its tip. Panthro saw it coming and ducked just in time. Shelves and tools were knocked to the ground under the Sword's onslaught and the very walls seemed to tremble. Only then did Lion-O let his arm drop and he stood staring at the devastation he had caused in a daze.

Felina, though shaken, hurried before him and waved a hand in front of his eyes. He blinked and took a deep breath.

"Mother?" he said uncertainly.

"Who? Where?"

Lion-O pinched the bridge of his nose and shook his head. "Sorry, Felina. What's wrong?"

"You just attacked Panthro, thinking he was Mumm-ra, and you ask me what's wrong? Lion-O, you aren't well."

He shrugged her concern aside. "I'm fine. Leave me alone."

"What did I do?" said Panthro, emerging warily from behind the Thundertank.

"He's hallucinating," said Felina. "Lion-O, give me the Sword."

"He's cunning," he was murmuring, disregarding her request for the Sword. "He'll be back."

"Who?"

"Grune. Didn't you see him?" He pushed past her and warily paced towards the hangar doors. "He wants me to go outside. Ha, it's a trap. Let Mumm-ra show his face in here and I'll teach him a lesson he won't forget in a hurry!"

Felina cast Panthro a look of alarmed bewilderment and watched helplessly as Lion-O rushed back and forth, checking one door, then another. At her side, Snarf purred with anxiety and twittered about his poor boy.

"What do we do?" Snarf worried. “You got any fancy creams or potions for this?”

Felina shook her head. "I think this is beyond my scope of healing. Get Tygra," Felina said decisively. "He said he was ill on the island. He might know what this is."

Snarf bounded away and Felina wandered over to where Lion-O was standing with his ear pressed to the wall. Her approach was timid, for she wasn’t sure if he’d see her coming toward him or some demon he’d strike out at.

"D'you hear them?" he hissed as she approached. "Ants, clawing at the wall, trying to get in."

"Lion-O," she said gently, "there are no ants. Come with me now. You aren't well."

He took a few unsteady steps back from the wall, his head hanging like someone too weary to support their own weight a moment longer. Panthro stepped forward to help him, only to get an elbow in his stomach.

"Stay away from me!" Lion-O roared. "You think I don't know what you are!"

His hand thumped down on the Paw opening mechanism and, before Felina could stop him, he had charged out, flinging away the Sword as he went.

"I knew it was gonna be one of those days," Panthro groaned as Felina helped him up. "Thanks. That boy packs one hell of a punch."

"I wish I knew what was wrong with him," said Felina. "Where's Tygra?"

"Right here," he said, coming through the doorway, looking cleaned up in a new suit and refreshed. "Snarf said there was trouble. What's happened?"

Felina pointed to where Lion-O had come to a halt a little way from the edge of the ravine that fell away below the Lair. "He was imagining things. I think he's got some sort of illness."

Tygra frowned. “High fever? Paranoia?”

“Yes!” Panthro and Felina answered in unison.

"Sounds like what I had on the island. That made for a rather, eh, interesting night of jumping at my own shadow."

"I thought you said you were over it," said Panthro.

"I am. It doesn't last long. Twelve hours or so, I surmised."

"So how did Lion-O catch it?"

"Well, if only he and I were affected, I doubt that it was airborne. It probably had a limited carrier."

"Like those red mosquitoes?" suggested Felina, remembering how Lion-O had complained of being bitten.

Tygra nodded. "Could be. I was certainly bitten. Was anyone else?" Felina joined Panthro in giving a negative response. "That's good news. Neither was Cheetara, and I don't think the Thunderkittens were there long enough to be affected. So, all we have to deal with is Lion-O."

He started out of the hangar to where Lion-O stood, ignoring Panthro's warnings about flailing elbows. For a long time, Lion-O stood with his head in his hands, but as they approached, he started to tear the clothes from his body, yelling about how infernally hot he was. With his top gone, Felina noticed with consternation that sweat had dampened large areas of back and in places she could actually see moisture glistening on his skin. As quiet as their approach had been, Lion-O sensed them coming and spun round to face them with an almost manic gleam in his eye.

"I'm going for a swim," he declared, nodding his head to the river that flowed far below in the gorge. "Who's coming with me?"

Panthro and Tygra exchanged worried glances. It had to be at least a hundred-foot drop to the river, which was running lower than was usual this time of year given Third Earth's climate of extremes. The chances were that Lion-O would not survive the fall, or if he did, would suffer terrible injuries.

"We'll all come," said Tygra, taking a few steps towards him with his hand outstretched. "But, let's go to the spring in the forest. It's cooler there."

Confusion clouded Lion-O's face. "You want to stop me."

"No," said Felina. "We want to help."

"Don't understand," he yelled, pounding the palms of his hands against his temples. "Need to clear my head!"

Before anyone could stop him, he had taken a huge step backwards from the safety of solid land into nothingness. Felina screamed as he vanished from her sight and plummeted down. When

she dared to open her eyes, she saw Tygra and Panthro at the edge of the precipice, hauling Lion-O up. The blue lash around his waist testified to Tygra's quick thinking and even quicker reactions in catching him before he had fallen to his death. She silently chided herself for panicking and hurried over to help them. Lion-O was trembling and sweaty, although his body now felt cold to her touch. The good thing was Lion-O seemed too worn out at this point to fight them off any longer.

"We have to get him inside," Tygra advised, ignoring Lion-O's incoherent paranoid ramblings. "Once the fever breaks, he'll be out of danger. Until then, keep him warm when he's cold, cool him down when he's hot and get some fluids into him."

"If he'll let us," said Panthro.

"Yes, that's a point. We'll have to keep him confined in the infirmary. I'll restrain him if necessary."

Felina shuddered. "Is that really necessary?"

Tygra laid a hand on her shoulder. "It's not a nice thought, is it? But right now, Lion-O is a danger to himself and everyone else. He will be all right, I'm sure, but we must take precautions."

She nodded reluctantly, knowing that he was right. "I'll sit with him and look after him," she volunteered.

Between them, Tygra and Panthro carried Lion-O back into the Lair and to the infirmary. His temperature had soared again and Felina set to work dampening his body with cold wet flannels. While Tygra was securing Lion-O to the bed, the door opened, and Cheetara rushed in. She took one look at Lion-O and her face creased with distress.

"Is he all right? What happened?"

"He has a fever and is suffering delusions. It will pass." Tygra glanced up at her and frowned. "You look upset. Don't worry, he'll be all right."

"Yes, I'm sure he will but, Tygra, Velouria is very restless and she's running a slight temperature," she said. "I didn't think anything of it until Snarf told me about Lion-O. Is she suffering from the same thing?"

"Does she have an insect bite on her body?" Tygra demanded. Cheetara nodded. "Then Jaga help her," he murmured. "Lion-O is big and tough. He'll survive, but Velouria is so young."

"You don't think she could die?" Felina said, and immediately winced at the bluntness of her own statement.

The ominous silence told her all she needed to know. Tygra and Cheetara left hastily to look after their daughter. Felina looked down at Lion-O, who was fighting weakly against the restraints. And though he looked up at her, she knew it was not her he saw.

"Mother," he whispered, his eyes glazed yet pleading. "Cut me loose before they get here. Please!"

Felina sighed. It was going to be a long night.



"Tygra," Cheetara called from where she stood panicked beside Velouria's crib. "Do something!"

The weary tiger shot up from his cot where he had tried to get some rest, the two of them having agreed to hold vigil in shifts through the night. He peered over the railing of the crib at his tiny daughter to find her in the throes of a very frightening looking febrile seizure. The logical, educated part of him knew this sort of thing was common in children with a fever as high as their little girl's, and although it looked scary it was often harmless. He grabbed his love's hand and gave it a tight squeeze.

"We have to let it pass," Tygra assured her softly. "And it will."

As if on cue, the baby's tiny body abandoned its stiff posture and went limp again, though the child was now too weak and sick to cry out. Cheetara reached into the crib to return the cold compress to the baby's forehead that had fallen off in the midst of the seizure.

Tygra's heart ached to look and see tears flowing down Cheetara's cheeks. She'd had a brave face on all night, but now it seems the seizure pushed her to the precipice of her fears. "She's not getting better, she's getting worse," Cheetara asserted and Tygra feared she was on the verge of hysterics. "There's got to be something more we can do!"

Tygra shook his head with much regret. "She's just so small, Cheetara. Her immune system can't tackle this like ours can and we also have to be very careful about what medication we give her. We have to wait it out and try to make her comfortable in the meantime." He tried to push aside from his mind the damage a high fever could do to a child if one survives it. Though at this point, he'd be grateful just to have the baby live.

He could tell Cheetara wanted badly to gather the child in her arms but resisted her maternal instinct, for the baby was already so hot, it didn't need their body heat compounding the problem. He was considering putting the child in a cool bath again, however. It seemed to help somewhat earlier in the night.

Cheetara fell weary into his arms, her shoulders rising and falling in time with her sobs. He squeezed her tightly, trying to be strong and reassuring enough for them both.



Meanwhile, Felina looked up as Panthro came into the infirmary.

"You paged me. What's going on?" Panthro asked.

She indicated Lion-O, who was lying drenched in his own sweat and shivering. "He's soaked his sheets and now he's got chills. I've got to get him on some dry bedding. But that means moving him and taking off his bonds."

Panthro assessed the situation thoughtfully, a finger tapping at his chin. "You think he's still dangerous?"

Felina shrugged. "He's been rambling all night, so he's still delirious. All we need to do is move him over to that bed," she explained, pointing across the room. "But I wanted you here just in case. I hardly think I'm a match for Lion-O if he gets it in his head that I'm a giant cockroach or something."

That seemed good enough for the panther. "Let's do it."

She released his bonds, and the two Thundercats gently helped a dazed Lion-O into a sitting position.

However, moving him roused him too well, and without warning, he pushed Panthro violently away from him just as he was helped off the bed and on his feet.

"Get back, foul creature!" he thundered at Panthro, whose momentum was only blunted by a very unforgiving wall.

Felina gasped, and then shrunk back as Lion-O fixed his glare on her next.

"Wait!" she pleaded while scrambling around the other side of the bed Lion-O had formerly occupied. Her eyes darted over to Panthro, who to her dismay was lying slumped against the wall. She was alone in this infirmary with her very much out-of-his-mind husband. And she didn't care for the crazy look in his eyes. "Calm down," she continued trying to keep her voice soothing and even. "We're just trying to help you."

“Lies!” he roared, while lifting the bed up and flinging it out of his way. Now there was nothing between herself and Lion-O. She stared at him slack-jawed for moment. “You’re a spy,” he accused her, as he rushed toward her.

She tried, but she couldn’t jump out of the way, and the next thing she knew, he had her pinned up against the wall. She was lifted to eye level with him, his strong hands pressed firmly against her collar bone – his thumbs, mere inches from her throat, which she was all too aware he could decide to use to crush the breath right out of her. She searched his glassy eyes desperately, hoping at any moment he’d come to his senses and see her – the real her. But all she saw was delusional rage and fear.

“Lion-O, please,” she begged. Felina kicked her dangling legs and grabbed at his arms to no avail. She considered clawing him, but she didn’t want to hurt him nor risk making him any angrier. “You’re hurting me.”

“How do you know my name?” he growled with suspicion. “Admit it. Admit you’re a Mutant spy and you were going to try to put poison in my veins.”

He pressed on her harder, his thumbs inching menacingly closer to her delicate throat. It was no use. The more she struggled the harder he gripped her.

All she could do was continue to plead for her life and hope someone heard the ruckus and was coming to help.



"It's our fault." WilyKat sat with his head in his hands and his little face screwed up in distress. "Velouria got ill because of us."

WilyKit sat beside her brother feeling just as miserable. They were keeping a low profile on the lower floor of the Lair. Kit sighed heavily and blinked back tears. “And I thought the Mutants would be our biggest problem. We didn’t think—“

“That’s right, you didn’t,” came Snarf’s admonishment as he came walking past, burdened with a load of supplies. “I hope you finally learned to do as your told.”

Kit gaped after the retreating Snarf. Ordinarily, she’d have something tart to say in return, but this time she had to begrudgingly admit no matter what their intentions had been the fact was Velouria was sick and she wouldn’t be if they’d stayed put as told. What was worse for her was she knew she’d done the convincing – she’d made the case for going. It wasn’t *their* fault, it was *hers*, she decided.

Kit's lip quivered and she looked away from her brother. She hated to let anyone see her cry, even her own twin. She got up abruptly, muttering some excuse to Kat and stalked down the hall in the opposite direction as Snarf. She had no particular destination in mind, but at least now she could let the tears flow. She stopped by a window, sulking at the moon that hung low and full in the sky.

I wish it was me, she thought bitterly. *I'd give anything if it were me that was so sick. It's not fair!*

Wild, desperate thoughts flew through Kit's mind including the idea of going into the Book and seeing if the Guardian could do something. Anything. Drying her eyes, she turned back and headed toward the Sword chamber with renewed purpose.



Felina prepared herself as it became clear nothing she said was working – and if anything, it was only pushing Lion-O to do her in. But just when she thought he'd made the decision to rid himself of her, something caught his attention to the left of them – though she saw nothing – and he promptly released his hold on her.

It was such a fast and unexpected release that Felina didn't have time to do anything but fall into a heap on the floor. She looked up, watching Lion-O swat at the air while shouting for demons and spirits to leave him be. Collecting her own senses, she hastily crawled over to Panthro who was coming to.

"Are you alright?" she whispered.

Panthro shook his head. "Yeah. But I see we're going to have to do this the hard way."

Felina glanced back at Lion-O, the feverish Thundercat still shouting at the thin air to leave him alone. As dangerous as he was in that state, Felina still didn't want to see him get hurt. She dutifully followed at a cautious distance behind Panthro, as he approached Lion-O unnoticed. Worry marred her face for she wondered what Panthro intended on doing.

"Hate to have to do this to you buddy."

Just as Lion-O began to turn at the sound of Panthro's voice, Panthro raised his arm up and hit the Thundercat Lord hard on the back of the head with a chopping motion, causing Felina to gasp and whimper. That had to hurt.

Lion-O dropped to his knees in a daze, and Panthro quickly collected him, placing him on the bed where they'd tried to take him in the first place. Panthro quickly restrained Lion-O to the bed and stepped back satisfied.

"You alright?" Panthro asked Felina.

She nodded, though she was still shaken from the ordeal.

"He'll be fine," he assured her. "But next time, just leave him lying in the sweat."

With that, Panthro left while rubbing the back of his own head. Felina sat quietly, watching Lion-O with a wary eye as he went back to softly babbling in a semi-conscious state. This couldn't be over soon enough for her. Even though she knew his mind was bent by fever, that was a side of Lion-O she never wanted to see again.



Morning was coming and Felina was exhausted. Physically, she was tired, but her mental anguish was the greater. She could only imagine how Tygra and Cheetara felt. To be so helpless in the face of illness was enough to drive anyone to distraction. Her prayers were with them; there was little else she could do.

The fact that Lion-O's fever had finally broken in the early hours offered a small glimmer of hope. Felina was glad when he gave up his insane ramblings and fell into a peaceful sleep once his body cooled enough to let his mind rest. So, he had been ever since and every time she looked in on him, she could not help grinning when she heard the soft purrs of his snores. He would be recovered by morning and she had already resolved to embarrass him by telling him of his impromptu striptease. Despite the solemn atmosphere, a small smile lifted the corners of her mouth when she thought of how mortified he would be. She could only hope that they would soon all be able to share in Lion-O's discomfort. But if anything happened to Velouria...

She pushed that thought firmly aside. Velouria was a strong, healthy baby. Of course she would be all right, she told herself. She hadn't heard any word on the baby and could only hope no news was good news.

For now, bed looked inviting, and since Lion-O had made a shambles of the other one, Felina crawled up beside him and nestled next to him, his massive chest serving well enough as a pillow. He did not stir, and it was just as well. She slipped into a peaceful sleep herself in moments.



“There you are,” Kat said with surprise, upon entering the Sword chamber and saw his sister sitting there, cross-legged on the floor. She was staring fixedly at the stand that held the Sword, Book and Key.

She blinked and looked up at him in surprise.

“I’ve been looking all over for you,” he continued.

Kit noticed he looked upbeat, which was promising. For her part, she had been sitting there – she didn’t know how long – trying to will the courage to go into the Book. But she’d heard how the Guardian was, how unpredictable such things were – not to mention her time travel trip into the Book hadn’t been fun…the falling part at the beginning well, suffice it to say she wasn’t a fan. Most of all, she must be getting mature for she actually stopped and considered the wisdom of trying to fix one mistake by possibly making another very huge one. In the end, she remained there just to have some solitude knowing this would be the last place anyone would expect to find her in the Lair.

“Any news?” she asked, wincing a little for fear of his answer.

"See for yourself," he said, offering his hand to help her up.

She got to her feet, only to stop when she heard voices approaching down the corridor. Trepidation wrapped cold fingers around her stomach when Tygra entered the open door and she saw his expression.

"How is she?" Kit asked, fearing his answer.

He sighed and a wan smile came to his lips. "She's over the worst," he said. "I think she's going to be all right."

WilyKat leapt straight up, shrieking with delight, and ran from the room.

"Thank Jaga," Kit said, letting out a pent-up sigh. "May I get you anything? You look exhausted." She still felt more than a little guilty for the fact that they had to go through such an ordeal in the first place.

"No, I'm fine."

"I'm sure Cheetara would like something. I'll take her up a drink."

"She'd appreciate that. Thanks, WilyKit."

Several minutes later, she was making her way upstairs, carrying a mug of coffee. Coming to Velouria's room, she knocked on the door and Cheetara called from within. WilyKit entered and

found her sitting by Velouria's crib, looking tired but relieved. On the other side, WilyKat was on tiptoes, craning over the side of the crib to stare down at the sleeping child with a look of sheer happiness on his face.

"She's all right," WilyKat said to his twin, as if he hadn't believed it truly until he saw it.

"It's wonderful," Kit replied, though she had a million apologies on the tip of her tongue.

"Isn't she beautiful?" he cooed.

WilyKit smiled and handed Cheetara the mug. She took it gratefully and carefully sipped the hot coffee. "How are you feeling?" Kit asked.

Cheetara nodded. "Better now."

"And Velouria?"

"Sleeping like a..."

"Baby?" Kit suggested.

"Something like that. How is Lion-O?"

"When I passed the infirmary, I heard him snoring like a blocked drain. He's all right."

The thundering sound of feet hammering along the corridor heralded Snarf's arrival and a moment later he burst into the room, jumping up and down and whooping with joy.

"Shush, Snarf," said Cheetara. "You'll wake Velouria up."

"Nah, she's still asleep," said WilyKat. "Look at her, dead to the world." He realized that his choice of words might have been better and bit his lip. "I mean she's sleeping soundly."

WilyKit gazed down at the child. Despite all the commotion around her, she slept on, unconcerned by her noisy visitors and at peace. Moved, Kit leant down and kissed her cheek.

"Sleep well, little one," she whispered. "And very sweet dreams."



Lion-O stirring beneath her and the sunlight shining in the room worked in concert to rouse Felina from her rest. She sat up and looked hopefully at Lion-O, whose eyelids were flickering open. Their eyes met and she was glad to note his seemed far more lucid than before.

"Felina?" he questioned groggily. "What happened?"

She smiled at the recognition. It was over. "You were very sick after we got back from the island."

He looked around the room taking in the disarray it was in before he realized he was still tethered to the bed. Lion-O looked at Felina in alarm.

"Oh, let me help you with that." She worked to quickly free his limbs from their confines.

"Did I do all that?" he wondered, regarding the mess in the room.

She nodded. "You were a little…delirious." Felina decided to leave out the small detail that he threatened to choke her to death in the process. Clearly, he hadn't been himself. "You remember any of it?"

"A little…" he trailed off, pausing to strain his memory to recall. "Oddly, I remember Jaga telling me I was sick and I needed to lie down."

Felina realized that perhaps Jaga was the 'demon' that had distracted Lion-O long enough for her to get away. It touched her that he would reach from beyond the grave to help her. "Yes, you were very sick," she simply confirmed. "It's over now, though." Looking upon him, she resisted the urge to throw her arms around his neck and squeeze him tight.

"I didn't hurt anyone, did I?"

She didn't want to completely lie to him, and what he had done to her left no visible marks. There was no point in making him feel too guilty about things that he couldn't control. "Well, you might owe Panthro an apology or two. Oh, and maybe the people of Third Earth for giving them a free show," she added, remembering to tease him about his impromptu stripping in the courtyard.

"What?" he asked, trying to sound indignant at first but even he couldn't hide a bit of mirth at the notion. He looked down and peeked under the sheet that covered him, confirming that he wore not a thread of clothing even now.

Felina shrugged. "You were in the courtyard without a stitch on - very undignified for a man of your station. Said you were hot…"

Though blushing a bit, he couldn't resist a jest at his own expense. "Any Warrior Maidens around to agree?"

Felina rolled her eyes at his attempt to play on the word ‘hot’. “Afraid not. A few Berbils and Wolos might need therapy, though,” she said with a wink to let him know she was only kidding. They shared a warm laugh.

“I guess that island won’t be our new vacation spot.” It was time to change the subject.

Felina shook her head. “Definitely not. Now I know why the Thunderians probably wanted to leave so badly.”

Lion-O nodded, his visage turning serious. “We’ll find them,” he assured her. “I’ll see to it.”

Watched from the window, with a red mosquito
I was not allowed to leave the room

I saw the sun go down, and now it's coming up
Somewhere in the time between
I was bitten, must have been the devil
he was just paying me...
A little visit, reminding me of his presence

Letting me know, he's a-waiting...
Two steps ahead of him, punctures in your neck
Hovering just above your bed
Hovering just above your bed

I was bitten, must have been the devil

He was just paying me...
A little visit, reminding me of his presence
And letting me know, he's a'waiting, he's a'waiting...
Up there... yeah
If I had known then what I know now...

--Red Mosquito, Pearl Jam