Chapter 23 of Signal in the Sky

The Last Time

By Purrsia Kat & Spaced Angel

Searing heat, hotter than the rays of Third Earth's circling sun, scorched his cheeks as Lion-O crested the top of the ridge and stared down at the bubbling mass of lava in the crater below. He was so sure that this time he had come to the right place. The earth was red and the weakness he could feel nagging at his limbs was proof that there was Thundranium somewhere nearby. The only thing missing, as with every other location he had tried, were the three countrymen he'd been relentlessly trying to locate.

With a sigh, he turned from the edge of the volcano and retraced his steps down its steep sides. It was a forlorn hope anyway, that the other Thunderians would be there. Who would be silly enough to live in the shadow of an active volcano? There again, what sensible Thunderian would live in the proximity of Thundranium? Either by choice or force, common sense told him that they would be long dead by now. The effect of temporary Thundranium exposure was a loss of strength that reduced a Thundercat to a helpless kitten. Anything longer than that could kill. With that in mind, Lion-O could only pray that his missing countrymen had not lingered too long in the place Cheetara had seen in her vision.

That rather meant that he was wasting his time on this self-imposed mission. Still, he had to do something. He had understood Tygra's reasoning that the search could be accomplished better when the Feliner was ready and flight worthy. Waiting around until it was would only be torture and at the stage they were at in building her, he was practically useless as help.

He had promised to find them, damn it! Why was it taking so long? Was this infernal planet so large that three distinctive Thunderians had gone unnoticed all this time? Cheetara's vision had given him hope, but it offered him no time frame. Even she had been unable to say when they had been at the place she had described whether in the far distant past or just days ago. Either way, rather than haunt the Lair and count the wasted days he had resolved to set out on his own. While everyone else had gone to bed after the festivities at the Treetop Kingdom, he caught a second wind of energy, thrown a few things into a bag and set off before anyone could stop him. He had a communicator to report his success or for his friends to contact him in case of an emergency, but so far, the channel had yet to be activated from either end.

Several weeks of living rough and trekking through alien landscapes had seen his hopes die somewhere along the way. He was growing used to the disappointment. So far, he had seen enough hills and mountains to last him a lifetime. On the plus side, he had found several new sites that could provide the Lair with enough raw Thundrillium to keep the energy reserves running for several hundred years.

If there was anyone left to need it.

So far, the only hope of the Thundercats' future survival lay with Velouria and she was destined to be an only child, since her mother could not risk another pregnancy. The hope of a playmate for her was pretty remote too, given his cool relationship with Felina. Her attitude on the journey home from the festivities had been discouraging. He had tried, very hard, and she had thrown his efforts back in his face. At the time, he had been irritated enough to want to give her a little of her own medicine, so when he had left, he had not bothered to say goodbye. Since then, he had tried to exonerate his actions by convincing himself that he had not wanted to wake her. Out here in the wilderness, there was no one to argue with him, except his own conscience. Not even the spirit of Jaga stirred to impart advice or otherwise keep him company. He was simply left with is own mind constantly reminding him that he had acted childishly and that no rationale that he was responding in kind really washed. He bitterly regretted it now. Nothing positive ever came of meeting immaturity with more of the same, he realized.

The past weeks away from Felina had allowed him to reflect on their situation with the benefit of distance, which is what she'd requested anyway. Yes, she was moody and unpredictable, but something she had said during their argument lodged in his brain and had been steadily festering into the understanding of what she had really meant. She had accused him of using their studies to get her into bed, which, fair enough, had been part of his interest. However, the implication that he was using her suggested that she expected something more out of their couplings than mere mutual pleasure. Could it be possible that she wanted a baby?

She had mentioned Tygra and Cheetara in the context of family several times too, so it wasn't such an odd conclusion, he thought. With all his overt resistance he'd shown to fatherhood, it was a small wonder that if that's what she desired that she'd be afraid to come right out and say it fearing a flat out refusal. After all, he reasoned, she did seem reluctant to spell it out for him, instead favoring vague hints and moody taunts. She wanted, he decided, to not pressure him into the prospect but to have him come to the same desire on his own. Yes! It seemed so simple to him now.

Since Velouria's arrival, he had certainly noticed a change in her mood. If Felina was feeling the call of parenthood, however, he wasn't sure he felt the same. Becoming parents was a major step, especially for two people who were hardly on speaking terms. Or was that just another excuse, he wondered. An heir was expected of him and some pretty big hints were being dropped. Having a baby meant accepting big responsibilities. More than that, it meant growing up, another nail in the coffin of his lost childhood. This was, he knew, the biggest reason he so vehemently resisted it. So much else had been thrust upon him and forced to become his responsibility, he wasn't sure he was ready to add another.

But then he recalled Felina's plea as to when the right time would be, if ever there would be one. He couldn't avoid the issue forever, especially now that his very race faced extinction. The fact that he engaged in dangerous work fending off evils such as the Mutants and Mumm-Ra, simply meant dallying could cost him the chance to produce an heir at all. He didn't necessarily have the luxury to wait until the timing was convenient for him. On the other hand, if Felina hadn't survived and happened upon Third Earth as well, he'd have no mate and no

pressure in that regard, given WilyKit was far too young to even consider at this point and Cheetara was very much taken.

Some might say Felina's arrival was a grand stroke of luck, not to mention she arrived fully grown just as he had. Some might even go so far as to say it was a coincidence so uncanny that it was further evidence that this union was one meant to be the divine harbinger of other miracles – a symbol of how they were meant to survive against great odds.

No pressure there, he thought, discouraged, and wondered if they hadn't already been marked for marriage if they would have gotten together anyway. He supposed that was all academic now. Some days, he thought otherwise regarding her arrival, in that it was decidedly unlucky, and it pained him to think she might pick up on that. It certainly wasn't her fault any more than it was his and he was certainly glad she'd survived Thundera's destruction. They were all trying to do the same very basic thing, and that was to continue on while making the best of being marooned on Third Earth, taking the Code of Thundera with them.

Still, he had to admit that having Velouria around had made him wonder what it would be like to have a little Lion-O of his own. He was sure the gesture would please Felina. On a more practical note, at least if things got worse in the future between them, he would have the heir on which everyone was pinning their hopes. A child – or two - would secure their future and swell the ranks of the next generation.

By the time he had reached the bottom of the slope, his mind was almost made up. He had little to gain on this trek around the less hospitable regions of Third Earth. Pinning his hopes on people who may already be dead hardly seemed sensible when there were more certain methods of securing the Thundercats' future. Not that he had given up on them entirely, but he was getting nowhere this way. Besides, he thought, turning for home, it would be a lot of fun giving Felina what she wanted. Perhaps having a baby wasn't such a bad idea after all.



The sound of muted laughter from inside the room made Felina pause in the corridor before knocking on Cheetara and Tygra's door. She hesitated not because she feared interrupting them, but because it only made her feel the difference between her situation and theirs so keenly. They were so happy and so in love, more so now that they had Velouria. They never seemed to tire of each other's company and were not afraid to let the others see their shows of affection. She envied Tygra's attentiveness to his mate, with the touches on her back, the random kisses and the smiles, in a way that Lion-O had never done. Just when she thought he was actually making progress he regressed even further and it was crushing.

She still could not believe that he had gone away without telling her. The note he had left explaining his departure had been addressed to all of them and was terse and impersonal. The

other Thundercats had expressed surprise at his decision, especially when an extra pair of hands would have been useful in helping with the completion of the Feliner, no matter what he'd noted otherwise in the letter. Felina had felt tempted to tell them what Lion-O had told her - he was a warrior, not a scholar, nor an engineer apparently. He had returned to the only thing he knew, relying on his wits and ego where others were taking more positive steps in the search for the missing Thunderians. Running away was just the sort of childish thing she had come to expect of him, but it still hurt that he had not even bothered to say goodbye. All he had said in the aftermath of their argument counted for nothing and once again his intention had been the pursuit of his own gratification.

She had consoled herself with that thought until his prolonged departure kept her from sleep one too many nights. A tactful suggestion that they should use the communicator to find out if he was all right met with a polite refusal from Panthro, who had said that it was better to let Lion-O be and let him come to his senses in his own time. Cheetara would likely sense if anything foul happened to him with her keen sixth sense, Panthro had reasoned. If there was a good reason to contact him for anything else, he had said, they would; until then, they would give him the space he needed.

He also gently reminded her that not too long ago she'd fled to sort herself out, and she begrudgingly admitted she was guilty of the same display of short-sighted dealings with her problems as she accused Lion-O. They really were perhaps too much alike, as Panthro mildly suggested. But there was something else in his tone, and Felina had gone away and mulled over these comments, finally arriving at the conclusion that Panthro had been implying she bore some portion of blame for Lion-O's departure. She had given him a hard time at the Treetop festivities and to her mind it was no more than he deserved. But then, she reminded herself, Lion-O still had some serious growing-up to do. They both did. And she did say she wanted time apart. Well, she was getting plenty of that.

Since then, she had tried not to think about him, the idea being to let her mind have a rest from the stress of their dysfunctional relationship. It was hard not to miss him, and she had to confess, not to worry about him. Moments like these, however, stood out. In the corridor listening to a happiness that was in stark contrast to her own brought him sharply back to mind in the fashion that so often stoked her insecurities. She missed and hated him in equal measure. Why couldn't he be even a fraction like Tygra? She was certain that if Lion-O just opened his eyes and took a few cues from the elder cat, their relationship would be exponentially improved.

Taking a deep breath, she knocked on the door. The laughter from inside faded and a second later, the door slid back. Cheetara was there, clad in a bathrobe, her hair wrapped in a towel and piled high on her head.

"Felina," she said, without a trace of annoyance at being disturbed. "What can I do for you?"

"I wondered if Tygra was with you." Silly question, she thought, when clearly he was. "I have something for him." Her gaze fell to the brown-backed book in her hands. "To read."

As a student, Tygra was everything that Lion-O was not. He listened to what she was telling him without getting glassy eyed or falling into a daydream state, and picked up the complexities of their native language with an ease that made her jealous, given the years she had spent struggling with it. True, her line was generally proficient in the field and she'd absorbed much for her actual age. Being taught early on was one way to ensure mass absorption of the materials, not to mention the isolation and constant instruction that went along with her early life on Thundera – but that made Tygra's ease of learning all the more amazing. Generally, the older one got, the harder it was for one to pick up on the intricacies of a foreign tongue, which meant Lion-O should have had one up on him there. Not true for Tygra. In a few weeks, he had progressed to the point where he was able to work through a text on his own and was proving to be a voracious reader.

"Yes, he's here," Cheetara said, looking over her shoulder. "Tygra, someone to see you."

He appeared in answer to her summons, with a towel wrapped around his waist and an equally wet Velouria in his arms. "Faris, Felina, exis lalatio," he said.

The compliment made her blush. "Hardly a queen," she said. "But very good, Tygra."

He smiled. "Did I get the inflections right?"

"Perfect."

"Glad to hear it," said Cheetara. "He's been practising that all day. I'll leave you two to talk."

He handed Velouria over to her. "Thank you, lalatio en exis cis."

Cheetara frowned. "I haven't the faintest idea what you're saying, Tygra."

"'Queen of my heart'," Felina translated for him, noting he'd used the wrong sense of the word 'heart' but decided she would not correct him in front of others – some courtesy she probably wouldn't have thought to extend Lion-O. Tygra's efforts were still very impressive for as little instruction as he had been given.

"Hmm, nice. Don't be too long."

She vanished into the depths of the room, leaving Tygra at the door. If he had no problem with his near nudity, Felina found it only made the reason for her visit even more difficult. She had to admit that she found him deeply attractive and not only for his handsome features. During their lessons, she found that he could do something that had been sorely lacking from her recent relationship with Lion-O - he could make her laugh. She found his sense of humour slightly quirky at first and hadn't been sure whether to laugh or not. Only when he had reassured her that he was joking with her did she grow comfortable in his company, and actually found him rather witty.

It was easy to see why Cheetara loved him; part of her had already fallen for him. He was smart, easy-going, honest and open. She looked forward to their lessons and was always disappointed when they came to an end. Despite her reassurance to Cheetara that their relationship was nothing more than teacher and student, she wondered what she would do if he did make a pass at her and wasn't entirely sure that she could trust herself. Not that she expected he would ever stray, for another of his admirable qualities was his devotion to Cheetara and their daughter. But sometimes in her own daydreams, she'd try to imagine such a scenario anyway, letting it play out in her mind and frightening herself with how far she'd let her idle fantasy carry on before catching herself and banishing the steamy thoughts from her mind.

She was more certain what would happen if she tried to initiate anything - that would be an end of their lessons, among other things. It didn't escape her that she'd never hear the end of comparisons to her mother if she tried such a thing, but still she couldn't resist testing the waters once. Out of curiosity, she had tested his loyalty to Cheetara by giving him love poetry as their first text. He had read it without embarrassment and from the look on his face as he spoke the words, she knew he was thinking only of one person. So, rather than lose his company, she harboured her secret crush and hoped that he did not notice. Really all it had accomplished was muddying her feelings for Lion-O and complicating matters further. Perhaps these lessons and time apart weren't the best ideas she'd ever come up with. And she was supposed to be the smart one.

Tygra cleared his throat, bringing Felina out of her daze. "Felina?"

"Oh, um, yes. I brought something for you to read," she said, holding the book out to him, while trying to not feel so flustered. "You're progressing so fast, I thought I would give you something a little more challenging."

"More poetry?" he said, inspecting the faded gold inscription on the book cover.

"No, a history of Thundera. It's one of the earliest texts written about our people and it's old-fashioned, but the grammar is perfect. If you could manage the first chapter in time for our next lesson..."

"I'll try. "

She knew he would, whilst juggling his other duties. Work on the Feliner had progressed faster than anyone had anticipated and Panthro was confident it would be complete in a matter of days. The all-important test flight was still a few weeks away, but at least they were moving in the right direction.

"Good. Then I'll leave you to, uh, what you were doing."

"Oh, we were giving Velouria a bath," he said, gesturing to his appearance. "Everything and everyone gets wet, believe me."

"Looks like fun," said Felina. Her tone was a touch more wistful than she had intended and she feared Tygra picked up on it. Suddenly she felt she had overstayed her welcome. "I'll, uh, see you later then," she mumbled. "Hope you like the book."

She hurried away, her gaze fixed firmly on the floor to hide her reddened cheeks. Why had she embarrassed herself like that? Craving something she would never have only made her look pathetic and make everyone feel sorry for her. That wasn't what she wanted at all. Curse Lion-O and his immaturity, she thought angrily. If he were there, she would have had something to say to him about his attitude. If only.

But then something flashed in her mind that Tygra himself had imparted on her last summer. He gently told her that she should not strive to be something she simply was not. Perhaps, the thought struck her, that she was projecting the same unrealistic demand on Lion-O. She kept wishing he were more like someone he simply was not. And really, who the person he was – he wasn't a bad person at all. He simply did not fit the mold of her romantic fantasies.

Wrapped up in her tempest of emotion and not really looking where she was going, she rounded a corner and came up against something large. She bounced off his chest. Caught off-balance, she would have fallen had not strong hands grasped her arms and steadied her. She looked up into the face of her saviour and her mouth dropped open. Hope had become reality. Lion-O had returned.

"You're back!" she said, astonished and feeling a rush of relief and joy to a degree she hadn't quite expected in light of her recent stormy thoughts.

"Yes," he replied. He was dusty and a little leaner, but there was none of the usual arrogance in his face that she expected. "I got back a few minutes ago. I was looking for you."

"Now you've found me." Given his previous behaviour, she was determined to play this cool and not give him the satisfaction of seeing how his actions had affected her. "Did you find them?" He shook his head. "Then what was it you wanted?"

"I wanted to talk to you."

"Very well. Say it." Felina worried he may start in again about the missing Thunderians and her role in letting it go this long without saying something. She couldn't imagine anything positive he'd seek her out for immediately following his return anyway.

"Not here." He glanced up and down the corridor. "Come to our room."

"*Your* room, you mean," she reminded him, suddenly getting another idea of what he might be seeking.

"Yes, whatever. Will you come?"

She hesitated, remembering Arilla's words. "If you're looking to, you know – it's not a good idea. Not unless you want to become a father." That should blunt any amorous designs he had, she firmly decided.

He looked unfazed, so she followed him a little way down the corridor to the room they had been sharing until recently. Clearly, he just wanted a private council with her, and this had her curiosity going. He entered before her and while he wandered deeper into the room, she lingered by the closed door, waiting to hear what he had to say. He noticed her position and accepted it without comment.

"While I've been away, I've had time to think," he began. "About us specifically. I realise that things haven't been going well between us for a while and I know I'm partly to blame for that. Perhaps largely to blame."

She stepped farther into the room, her interest piqued. He'd thought about her while he was gone? That was encouraging and made her heart race a little faster.

"Saying sorry wasn't enough, was it? You were trying to tell me something and I was too stupid to understand what you meant." He approached her and stopped a few feet away close enough to touch her if he wished and if she allowed him. "We got off to a bad start," he continued. "I want us to try again and I want things to be different this time."

A fresh start - she wondered if it could be done as she searched his face for any further clues to what he was thinking. She sensed there was more he wanted to say but had no clue what might be on the tip of his tongue. Of course, she knew what she **hoped** he was on the verge of confessing.

She rested her palms gently onto his chest, her eyes never breaking away from his. "Different how?"

"Well," he began, "I know I haven't been easy to get along with and that I've been closed off to certain ideas in the past. I never thought about the big picture before and most of all, how my selfishness in the matter has affected you. You've been trying to tell me, I know."

Felina relaxed and her expression softened. "I haven't exactly been a picnic to be around either. A fresh start sounds wonderful." And she meant it, too. Pining for Tygra or wishing fate had dealt a better hand was certainly unproductive, and as much as she hated how Lion-O always liked to put it, she had to admit they might as well do the best they can under their circumstances. And that would entail making a better effort to get along instead of nitpicking at one another so much. Of course, she'd come to this conclusion before, but once her mood darkened it was back to the old ways. Well, if he was serious then no more. She would make a firm resolve to be less negative and just accept what overtures he did make with grace. It would be her contribution to the fresh start.

He smiled softly and reached out to tuck a tuft of her hair behind her ear. "What would you say if I told you I was thinking part of the fresh start would mean having a baby with you?"

She stared at him with her mouth dropped open, not believing her ears. "A baby? You and me?"

It wasn't quite what she expected to hear and given how absolutely opposed to it he'd always been before she was stunned. She had to admit that his prior objection to starting a family had in some measure been a personal affront to her. So, the fact that he was offering to embark on such a venture without her pressing the issue signaled to her that perhaps he was capable of treating their marriage beyond one of ordained convenience.

"Yes. If you want."

She blinked, still too shocked to say more while her mind tried to grasp the implications of the decision. On one hand she wasn't sure she was prepared for the changes it would bring. She never really considered it before with any seriousness given how closed Lion-O had been up to that point to the notion of a baby. On the other, perhaps a child between them would draw them closer together and give them a common interest and bond. This might be a chance she couldn't pass up. And best of all it was his idea so there was no risk in him resenting her for pressuring him into the decision. Felina couldn't see how she could lose.

"It's what you were trying to tell me, wasn't it? I've been selfish, I realise that now. The truth is, becoming a father is a little frightening." He checked himself and smiled. "All right, a *lot* frightening."

"More than facing Mumm-ra?" she said, coming back to her senses by lightly teasing him.

"Definitely. But I'm willing to put those fears behind me for you."

It was probably the most romantic thing he had said to her in a long while. Moved almost to tears, she flung her arms around him and hugged him. "I've missed you," she confessed unabashedly. "You were gone such a long time."

"Too long." His arms closed around her and his fingers mingled with her hair. "You I missed most of all."

"You did?"

"Of course. You ever doubted that?"

"You didn't say goodbye."

He nodded. "I was angry and not thinking. There's not a day gone by that I haven't regretted it. I know it's only words, but... I'm sorry, Felina. I *will* make it up to you."

Yes, he would, she realized without doubt to his sincerity. Going away had done him the world of good. In the space of a few weeks, he had grown and returned with a new attitude that

she found more attractive than the old Lion-O. In time, with a little luck, they would have their own family. She had seen how much more in love Tygra and Cheetara seemed to be since the birth of Velouria; surely a baby would do the same for her and Lion-O. How could he not love the mother of his child? Of this she was now thoroughly convinced. They would embark on a new start, with a new addition to their family.

"Well, you can make a start by having a shower," she said, taking in his appearance. "You smell awful."

"Do I?" he said with a grin.

She wrinkled her nose in mock disgust. “Yes. Like sweaty old pine needles and…dirt. A bit musty besides.”

He laughed lightly and moved a step toward the adjoining washroom. "Join me?"

"You want me to?"

He definitely was serious about a baby if he extended such an invitation knowing she was once again nearing her peak of fertility. He didn’t mean to waste a moment of time. Her stomach roiled with a mix of excitement and dread at the prospect. But more excitement than anything, she decided, even as she brushed off a nagging thought that this too was happening too fast. She had indeed missed him terribly, besides, and was tired of rebuking his every effort in this regard.

"Of course."

He stooped slightly and paused with his lips just inches from hers, awaiting her consent. Pleased that he was allowing her the initiative, she closed the gap between them and kissed him.



In the heart of evil, something stirred. Stone scratched against stone as the heavy stone lid of the sarcophagus drew back. Stale air flooded out, bringing with it a shuffling carcass, swathed head to toe in decaying and trailing bandages. After a lengthy recovery, Mumm-ra the Ever-Living took his first steps back into a world of long shadows and rancorous evil. Twisting his ancient skull to take in his surroundings, a scowl of disapproval wrinkled the remaining flesh of his face.

"I have been gone too long," he murmured. "I smell the scent of cat upon the wind." He crept towards the still cauldron and, with a wave of his hand, sent the waters into a bubbling frenzy. "What have those accursed Thundercats been doing in my absence?"

An image appeared on the boiling waters, showing Tygra's disappearance in the Whirlpool of Infinity and the other Thundercats' dash to rescue him from the island where he had been washed up.

"Interesting," Mumm-ra said. "At least the Mutants having been earning their keep while I have been away."

"But they have failed once again," boomed the co-joined voices of his evil masters. "As did you, Mumm-ra!"

He raised his arms in appeal to the red-eyed statues. He had already spent long enough deprived of their powers and had no intention of returning to his helpless state. A little humility went a long way with the Ancient Spirits. "Then instruct me, great ones. Tell me what I must do."

"The Thundercats have discovered that three of their countrymen landed here on Third Earth. Lion-O has been searching for them."

"And presumably failed to find them." A smile cracked his withered features. "They would make a perfect lure to lead Lion-O and those other wretched Thundercats to their doom! Ancient Spirits of Evil," he intoned, as lightning crackled about his head, "transform this decayed form to Mumm-ra, the Ever-Living!"

He burst from the constraining bandages, invigorated by the ancient magic. Gone was his weak and decayed body. Evil power rippled through his muscles and tickled his very fingertips, waiting to be put to use against his enemies.

"I shall take the form an innocent Berbil," he said. "And deliver to the Thundercats a message, a location of where to find their countrymen. And then…" His laughter filled the echoing spaces of the Pyramid. "Then I shall destroy them all!"



Lion-O lay on the bed, still rather soaked from their adventures in the shower as well as fresh sweat and stared up at the ceiling rapturously while holding Felina close to him. He wasn’t sure if it was the time apart, the culmination of months of pent up sexual frustration, or some new intimacy born of their decision to start a family, but whatever it was, what just happened between them was like never before.

There had been no trace of awkwardness in their movements, and she’d been more receptive than ever to him. In fact, she’d reacted to his touch in ways she never had before, vocally at times, and it had given him pause at one point as he thought he might have hurt her.

After a quick assurance on her part, he found he rather preferred the uninhibited Felina. In fact, it had the domino effect of making him feel more competent and secure in his ability to please her and in turn, heightened the experience for the both of them.

They'd started in the shower, moved out into the room at one point and somehow, he didn't quite remember exactly how, ended up sweaty and entwined on the bed. Perhaps this was the part about making up Panthro so advocated. If so, he definitely could see why.

She stirred beside him, and the feel of her damp, naked skin against his stirred his interest once again. He was prepared to spend the afternoon forgetting his cares for once and giving nothing but his undivided attention to Felina. Having her in such an amorous, agreeable mood certainly helped.

He rolled over onto his side and looked down into her face, which was still flushed from their earlier encounter. She looked into his eyes with such ardent affection it further stoked the fire in his heart. She reached up and dug her fingers into the wet matted hair stuck to his neck, pulling him to her and urging his lips to hers.

Their kiss was intense, and Lion-O could tell by the way her body rose toward his that she too wanted to make love again. He could think of no reason not to oblige.

Everything promised to be a pleasurable repeat of their earlier coupling. Maybe even more so, as the more she responded in new, erotic ways to his efforts, the more he was spurred on to new levels of enjoyment himself. Except this time when Felina was brought to the precipice of her passion, she uttered something that shattered his mood like taking a ball bat to fine crystal.

Her eyes closed, and she arched her back and spoke a name, quite clearly.

"Tygra," he heard her say with strained passion.

The bottom instantly falling out of his mood, he pushed himself away from her and stared at her in shock. He tried to convince himself that he somehow imagined the whole thing but no, she'd said it - and all too distinctively and passionately for his ego.

He watched her lift herself up on her elbows, regarding him with a measure of confusion as she came out of her lusty haze.

"What's wrong?" she asked through ragged breaths, and it struck him that she hadn't even realized what she'd done. Or she was acting the innocent. He swore, if this was another stupid ploy to make him jealous…

He pushed himself up to a sitting position and tried not to look as wounded as he felt. But those two syllables, uttered at the most inopportune time, brought up all his insecurities about those two and now there was no doubt. She must have been thinking of him, while—

Lion-O squeezed his eyes shut and looked away, not allowing himself to finish the thought. If it were a game she was playing, he wouldn't let her see it affecting him so.

"You really don't know?" he asked suspiciously, his voice low and strained. It sank in that perhaps all this newfound reaction was less about him and more about her feelings for Tygra, and the thought was devastating to him.

A long silence followed but when Lion-O found the courage to look at her again, he could read it in her expression that she'd remembered and was rightly horrified. She hadn't done it on purpose, but quite by accident, that much was written all over her face. And Lion-O felt sickened, as somehow this was actually worse than if she had been playing around with him, for the proverbial cat was out of the bag now.

Teacher and student only, indeed, he thought bitterly. Like a father to her, eh? He knew his instinct to keep those two apart was right on target. Of course, she didn't listen to him as usual, and here they were with the fact that she carried a torch for the architect staring him in the face. It was beyond humiliating, regardless of whether anything had actually happened between them. The hurt was nearly the same.

One of her hands was clasped tightly over her mouth, as if she feared more incriminating syllables would tumble out if she let go. When she finally removed it, she tried to explain herself and apologized profusely in a fumbling, hopeless fashion, but it was little use.

He held up a hand to signal her to stop while she still had a shred of dignity left as he rolled out of bed. He busied himself with getting dressed, ignoring any other utterances from her.

Lion-O didn't know what he was going to do, but he couldn't spend another second in the same room with her. Not right now. The blow to his ego was too fresh and he left paying no heed to her pleas for him to wait.



"Are you sure this is gonna work?" Slithe muttered.

Monkian sighed. He had already explained his idea five times to Slithe that morning and he was not inclined to do so again. "Yes, it will work. All we have to do is wait."

He thought back to the night after Arilla had buzzed him on the communicator in the middle of the night. Just to show the man-hating wench who was boss in their team-up, he stood her up without a shred of guilt the next day. He smiled a little, imagining her cursing her way back through the jungle, fighting off the humidity and enormous bugs along the way. Served her right. At any rate, she was much more pleasant when they finally did meet up much later, and

mentioned nothing of the slight and had dropped all her foolish babbling about Lion-O's marital problems and other things that didn't really concern him. He'd showed her. They met on his behest and *she* was following *his* plan.

"We seem to be waiting a little too long," Jackalman grumbled. "I do hate sitting around in the mud like this. It makes my fur damp."

The only member of the gathering who was not moaning was Vultureman, who instead Monkian suspected was sulking because he had not thought of the idea first.

What he had not told them was that he had met with Arilla the night before and told her to tell Willa that a message had finally arrived from the southern tribes with news of the missing Thunderians. That would bring the Thundercats hurrying to the Treetop Kingdom. On their way, they would have to take this road and here, with a little help from his fellow Mutants, he could ambush them. The Thundercats would be their captives and the Sword of Omens would be in their power. It was so simple. What could go wrong?

"Not much longer," he reassured them. "Then the Thundercats will be at our mercy."

"So, you keep saying," said Slithe, "and I'm still sitting here, crouched in this bush, with ants in my pants. If I get bitten, I'll have your hide for this, yes!"

Monkian ignored him. If Slithe did get bitten, it would only make the day even better. And while he was complaining, Monkian would take the Sword and make himself leader. Yes, Lord Monkian had a nice ring about it. He'd like to see Slithe grovel.

Until then, all he had to do was wait and put up with his fellow Mutants' incessant whining.



"All right, I'm coming," muttered Panthro as he made his way downstairs to the main door. A Berbil had been detected approaching the Lair, presumably on an errand of some kind. Leaving Tygra in the Control Room, he set off to find out what their visitor wanted. The Berbil had beaten him to it and was thudding his fist steadily against the metal door by the time he arrived.

Opening it, he lowered his gaze a few feet and found a blue-furred Berbil staring up at him. "Afternoon," he grunted. "What can I do for you?"

"I have a message for you, Thundercat," the little bear said in its strange metallic voice. "The Warrior Maidens have found your missing countrymen. I am to take you to them."

"They've found…?" Panthro stopped himself and instead hollered up the stairs. The commotion brought the others charging down to see what had happened. With an audience waiting on his every word, he waited until he had complete command of their attention and cleared his throat. "Guess what? Willa came up trumps. She's found them."

"Found who?" said WilyKat.

"The three missing Thunderians."

"She did?" said Lion-O, and Panthro noticed the news brightened his mood. When he'd first approached, he looked more thunderous than ever which made Panthro inwardly grimace. That usually meant woman troubles, so he hadn't been back but a short time and already those two were at it again. He fought the urge to sigh. "That's fantastic news. Where are they?"

"I am to take you to them," the Berbil repeated.

"Did she say where she found them?" Lion-O wanted to know. "Are they hurt? Are they all right?"

"I am to take you to them," came the flat reply.

"Yes, right. Panthro, get the Thunder Tank and we'll--"

"No can do," said Panthro. "I was stripping down the engine. We'll have to go on foot."

"We can get there double quick," said WilyKit. "We'll go on our spaceboards!"

"No, you won't," said Lion-O. "You'll stay here and keep an eye on the Lair."

"Aw!" the kittens chorused. "That's not fair!"

"We always get the rotten jobs," grumbled WilyKit. "I wish I was a big Thundercat so I could go with you."

"In view of what happened last time," said Panthro, "I think one of us should stay, just in case. Plus, you got to go to that party at the Treetop Kingdom so don't hand me the 'we never get to do anything' sob story."

Lion-O saw the look in his eye and understood. "Tygra's on duty. He can stay as well." He went to the intercom and activated it, only to receive no answer. "That's strange. He's not answering."

"That's because I'm right here."

Panthro glanced over Lion-O's shoulder to where Tygra was descending the stairs.

"We've had a message from Willa," Lion-O explained, although Panthro found it interesting that Lion-O seemed tense with Tygra in the room and avoided direct eye contact with the tiger. What now, he wondered. "She's found the missing Thunderians. We're going over there now."

"Oh." Tygra looked slightly perplexed. "That's odd. She just called and gave a message that she had news about them. I was coming to find you."

"She was making sure, I suppose. She knows we've been anxious for word," reasoned Lion-O. "We'll be back later. Tell Snarf to get a party prepared. I want to make their homecoming special."

"I'll see to it," said Tygra.

Panthro watched the exchange with muted interest, and if Tygra picked up the strange vibes too, he gave no indication. His attention turned to Cheetara, who had Felina trailing behind her as she entered the foyer. Felina looked positively ashen, and Panthro's brow knitted. Definitely something was up between the newlyweds, and he had a weird feeling it wasn't the usual bickering they were all getting used to. Oh well, they'd have to sort it out on their own, he decided. He'd done imparted all the advice he had to give to both of them and if they weren't going to take it, best of luck to them.

Leaving Tygra in charge of the Lair and two miserable kittens, Panthro followed Lion-O down the steps as he set a blistering pace in the direction of the Treetop Kingdom. The summer sun had yet to rise to its zenith, but the day was already warm and before long Panthro noticed that even Cheetara was struggling to keep up with their leader. Calling to Lion-O to slow down, he hoisted the struggling Berbil up under his arm.

"How's that, little fella?"

"Better, thank you," said the Berbil.

"What's the rush?" he said when Lion-O retraced his steps to where he stood with Cheetara and Felina, both of whom were looking hot and sweaty.

"This is great news," said Lion-O. "Aren't you excited?"

"Yes," said Cheetara. "But collapsing with heat exhaustion won't help them or us."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't realise." He offered his arm to Felina, and she took it hesitantly as if that was the last thing she expected him to do. "Now I'll have someone to moderate my speed."

Even so, his pace was still a little hurried and Panthro soon found himself dropping behind the couple as the weight of the Berbil took its toll. He noticed the couple seemed stiff in their posture, and after a few whispered exchanges seemed content to ignore each other. With a

small shrug, he reminded himself that he decided to wash his hands of their problems. Cheetara strolled along at his side, seemingly content to travel at a more relaxed speed.

"You don't have to stay with an old slow coach like me, you know," he said to her.

She smiled back at him. "You aren't old, and you aren't slow either."

"Maybe so, but I can't keep up with the young 'uns like I used to. Go on, leave me. I'll manage."

"No, it's too hot. I'm happy where I am."

Loyal to the last, that was Cheetara, he noted with a grin. She could no more leave him behind than he could her if she were in his position. Beside one of such speed and agility, he could not help but think of the accident that had cost him his leg. He tried not to dwell on the loss, but on days like these he felt it keenly. He was aware that there were some things he could no longer do as easily as he had done in the past and, every time he had to adjust the hydraulics, he was reminded that this thing attached to him was of metal and not his own skin and bone. At times like that, he told himself he was one of the lucky ones and that his injuries could have been a lot worse. Thoughts like that usually brought back to his senses, as they did now. The fact that he'd busted that damnable jackal's jaw also brought him a strange sense of well-being.

Entering the shade of the forest, he felt the temperature drop a few degrees. The sweat started to dry on his arms, and he blinked as his eyes tried to make the adjustment from light to dark. Then, out of the corner of his eye, he caught the slightest flutter of leaves falling from a sizeable bush. Before he could call out, he saw Slithe and Monkian leap from the undergrowth and hurl themselves at Lion-O and Felina. Rushing to help them was out of the question, for Jackalman and Vultureman had appeared out of nowhere and were blocking his path.

"Give it up, Thundercat," said Vultureman. "We've got you trapped!"

"You and whose army?" Panthro growled.

The two Mutants chuckled, a hesitation that cost them dear. Seconds later, they had been flattened by a falling Berbil as Panthro threw the little creature at them and knocked at least one of them senseless.

"Nice move," said Cheetara.

"One of my better ones." Panthro figured since the Berbil was a machine and not living, he could afford to utilize him in such a fashion with minimal risk. He held out his hand and helped the Berbil to his feet. "You all right?" The Berbil seemed slightly shaken and its eyes were glowing. "That a malfunction or something?"

"No malfunction, Thundercat," said the Berbil, its voice lowering to a throaty growl. "For I am no Berbil, but Mumm-ra, the Ever-Living!"

A red aura surrounded the metal body as he prepared for the transformation. Panthro exchanged a worried glance with Cheetara, knowing that their problems had just doubled. Preparing for a battle, he readied his nunchucks and watched in surprise as Jackalman scrambled to his feet and flung a net over the glowing Berbil.

"Got you!" he cried, pinning him to the ground. "One down, four to go!"

"You fool!" roared Mumm-ra. "Release me, you cretin!"

Jackalman reeled away in horror, aided by a blow from Cheetara's staff. Rolling over once, he ended up sprawled across the path, where Slithe promptly tripped over him. With the glowing tip of the Sword of Omens driving him back, Monkian soon joined his fellow Mutants on the forest floor, leaving only Mumm-ra still struggling furiously with the cords of the net, unable to break free while still in his Berbil disguise.

Lion-O wandered over and looked down at him. "So, you're back," he said.

Mumm-ra glared up at him. "You would all be my prisoners now if not for those bungling Mutants!"

"Better luck next time," said Lion-O. "Now what shall we do with you?"

Panthro's eye fell on the length of rope that Vultureman had dropped. His whispered idea to Lion-O met with a hearty grin.

"Oh, yes, I like it," he said.



"You left him hanging in a tree?" said Tygra incredulously when Panthro had finished telling him what had happened in the forest.

"Yep," said Panthro. "We tied him up in that net of his and left him dangling in the wind!"

"Was that wise?"

"Probably not," Lion-O conceded, a note of irritation in his tone. "But he deserved it. If it hadn't been for the Mutants, we would have wandered straight into his trap."

"And Mumm-ra thwarted the Mutants' plans," said Panthro. "Overall, it's been a good day."

Felina listened to the exchange quietly and winced a little at Panthro's assertion. It was a good day for some, perhaps. For her it was up there for one of the worst days of her life. She avoided even looking at Tygra for fear her face would go aflame with guilt and embarrassment. How could she have done that? How could her mind and mouth betray her so badly?

She didn't even know why, given her joy at Lion-O's new attitude and her subsequent intensified attraction to him, but somewhere in the midst of the most intimate of moments, Tygra flashed into her mind and his name came from her lips. The only way she could possibly be more mortified was if Lion-O decided right now, in front of them all, to put his foot down while shouting to the world her slip of the tongue as the reason why the two of them could no longer continue their studies together. The only reason she'd even come along with them that afternoon was to put on airs that all was well, at least until Lion-O had calmed down enough to hear her out. She hoped to avoid calling attention to any strangeness about, although she was a horrible actress and already sensed that at least Panthro picked up on something.

She wished Lion-O would listen to her long enough to realize he didn't need to make such a decree. No, her shame was enough to put an end to that. She'd had her toes in those troublesome waters of temptation long enough and now it had done more damage to her relationship with Lion-O than she ever dreamed – and just when things were starting to go so well! Their fresh start was in the ditch right off the starting line. It was enough to make her want to cry, and Felina concentrated to stave off the threatened flow of tears.

She'd tried to explain to Lion-O on the path that it didn't mean what he might think it meant – that nothing at all actually happened between her and Tygra while he was gone - and that she was sorry, she'd lost her head and so on. But he wanted to hear none of it. He did promise to talk to her later when he had time to cool off, but his body language and tone made her dread the encounter more than look forward to it. She was fairly sure she would not like what he had to say. For now, she refused to think one thoughtless word would do them in for good. She shuddered to think that afternoon's play could have been the last time they'd be together. He had to forgive her, didn't he?

She chanced a glance at Lion-O and found he did not respond to her if even he noticed her gaze upon him at all. In the meantime, she would simply wait for him to talk to her as promised and give him space. She was humbled by the experience. Felina did not want to chance further damaging whatever was left between them by trying to force him to listen to her. Waiting, she could already tell, was going to be its own kind of hell.

"No doubt," she heard Tygra say when she again focused on the conversation around her. "Now we know that Mumm-ra has returned from his prolonged absence, we can no longer assume our safety. He will want revenge for this, you know that."

"And we'll be ready for him, as always," said Lion-O, with his usual bravado. Felina noticed the odd way in which Lion-O would not really look directly at Tygra when speaking to him, and she wondered if the tiger also noticed. She certainly hoped not. She'd sooner die than have him find out she had a crush on him. She'd never be able to look anyone in the Lair in the

eye again. "Hopefully with a new weapon in our armoury." Lion-O looked to Panthro expectantly.

"Feliner's nearly ready to roll," said Panthro. "We've been working flat out since you've been gone. Just a few more adjustments to the space drive and we can start thinking about a proofing flight."

"How soon?"

"You give us a hand, sooner than we first thought. Couple of days suit you?"

Lion-O nodded. "That suits me very well. Now that Mumm-ra knows about our missing countrymen, we don't have a minute to lose. We have to find them before he does!"

Well I told you once and I told you twice
But ya never listen to my advice
You don't try very hard to please me
With what you know it should be easy

Well this could be the last time
This could be the last time
Maybe the last time
I don't know. Oh no. Oh no

Well, I'm sorry girl but I can't stay
Feelin' like I do today
It's too much pain and too much sorrow
Guess I'll feel the same tomorrow

Well this could be the last time
This could be the last time
Maybe the last time
I don't know. Oh no. Oh no

Well I told you once and I told you twice
That someone will have to pay the price
But here's a chance to change your mind
'Cuz I'll be gone a long, long time

Well this could be the last time
This could be the last time
Maybe the last time
I don't know.

--The Last Time, Rolling Stones