Chapter 24 of Signal in the Sky

Shotgun Down the Avalanche
By Purrsia Kat & Spaced Angel

Tygra was just about to give up his search when he spotted her in the corridor near the Lair kitchen. Something aromatic was floating out of the room, and Tygra could only guess that Snarf was hard at work preparing the evening meal already.

“Felina,” he called out, quickening his steps to catch up to her.

She started as she whirled around to face him.

“You’re a hard one to catch up to these days,” he said with a pleasant smile.

Her smile, however, was strained. “Oh, yes. We’re all so busy lately,” she muttered, seemingly unwilling to meet his eye.

He scowled slightly, wondering what on Third Earth had gotten into not only her, but also Lion-O lately. Both of them acted as if his presence made them extremely uncomfortable, and try as he might, he couldn’t figure out what he’d done to merit that reaction.

“Felina, is everything alright? Have I – have I done something wrong?”

She blinked, looking up at him in shock. “Oh, of course not. W-why would you ask such a question?”

Her eyes darted around the corridor, as if she was afraid someone would happen upon them at any moment. It was the action of someone worried about getting caught in the act of doing something shameful. They were only talking, and so this behavior further perplexed the tiger.

“For starters, we haven’t had a lesson in the last few days. I know we’re working pretty steady on the Feliner, but that never stopped us before.”

He waited patiently for his explanation as the girl fidgeted and shifted her weight from foot to foot, deftly avoiding his gaze.

“Like I said, just busy.”

Tygra sighed, not quite buying the notion, but he could tell she wasn't up to talking about whatever caused her change in attitude. "Fair enough. I only wanted to give this back to you," he added, holding out the leather-bound volume she'd given him a few days earlier.

"Oh, you've read it already?" she asked, while taking the volume from him.

His hand brushed hers during the exchange, and she reacted as if his touch burned her. Yes, something definitely was amiss.

He went on with a nod, deciding to let the reaction go unquestioned for now. "It was an interesting read, you were right. I couldn't put it down in the evenings. Although," he admitted, "there were some passages that I couldn't quite grasp, and I was hoping you could clarify a few things for me."

She took a few steps back and her nervous fidgeting increased noticeably. "I'm glad you liked it."

He noted she completely ignored his request for help and felt more than ever that she was determined to avoid him. Her insistence that life had gotten busy simply didn't jibe with her dodgy behavior.

Felina flashed a quick smile and spared a momentary glance in his direction. "We'll have to talk about it later. We're going to be late for the unveiling of the Feliner if we don't hurry."

Before he could respond, she was off in a dash toward the lower levels.

"That was odd," he muttered to no one in particular.



All the occasion needed was a fanfare, Felina thought as she entered the hangar. After months of planning, weeks of toiling, and a few sleepless nights the Feliner was finally finished. Its creators were proud, and rightly so. What had started as a sketchy idea had made it to completion and now stood, cloth-covered and waiting for the moment when its arrival was announced to world.

It needed a fanfare. All it got was Snarf's impatience.

"Weeow, get on with it, Panthro," he grumbled. "I've got a pot roast in the oven and if I take my eye off it for more than a minute, it'll turn to cinders."

"Keep your hair on, Snarf," Panthro said good-naturedly. He clapped his arm firmly around the shoulders of his partner in crime. "Allow us a few moments of glory."

"Before it all goes hideously wrong, you mean?" said Tygra, the smile on his face showing that his lack of confidence in his creation was only to tease Panthro.

"But we all know what it looks like," Snarf went on. "Why bother to cover it up?"

"Tradition," said Panthro. "Used to be that every new craft was unveiled. We're a long way from home, true, but I see no reason to baulk our luck. We're doing this properly or she's not leaving the hangar."

Snarf mumbled something discouraging, but Panthro ignored him and clapped his hands to bring everyone to attention. That the other Thundercats were already waiting for him to begin was beside the point; it was the sense of occasion that mattered.

"Fellow Thundercats, Snarf and Velouria," he said, favouring the beaming child in Cheetara's arms with his broadest grin, "I would like to introduce you all to the newest addition in our armoury, the Feliner!"

He grabbed a corner of the grey cloth and gave it a hearty yank. Great ripples of material cascaded to the ground, revealing beneath it a squat craft of white and red. Although Felina had seen it often as it was being built, she had not appreciated how fully Panthro and Tygra had carried the feline theme of its name throughout its design. From the front, it gave the impression of a mighty cat crouched on its haunches and ready to spring into action. Beneath the cabin were triangular protuberances that gave it the look of fangs visible in a half-open mouth. Whether they had any practical value or were there for more aesthetic considerations, Felina could not tell. All the same, they suited the look of this craft they had dubbed the 'Feliner'. Stubby of wing and compact in body, it spoke of latent power, like a slumbering lioness waiting for the scent of prey to come within her range.

"Well?" said Panthro, appealing to the gathering for their thoughts and approval.

"It's perfect," said Lion-O without hesitation. "What's its achievable range?"

"Ah."

Panthro deferred the question to Tygra. Felina inwardly winced, a habit she seemed unable to break now whenever Lion-O and Tygra were put in close proximity. She was almost confident that her slip of the tongue would never reach the tiger's ears; after all, Lion-O had his pride, as maddening as it could sometimes be. Even so, she couldn’t help but feel that slip, which they hadn’t had the time – or more accurately, Lion-O hadn’t had the inclination – to discuss yet, was going to cost her somehow. And

watching the two of them interact reminded her all over again of her wretched tongue's betrayal of her most secret thoughts.

In some ways, she'd already paid. Her exile from their shared bedroom was the first phase. That had been difficult enough after their renewed intimacy and hope for the future, not to mention Felina had found that move so much easier when she was the one deciding to do so. Being asked to leave had been a whole other matter, and she had a renewed appreciation for how her leaving voluntarily at times in the past must have affected him.

Since then, he had steadfastly avoided being in a situation where she might have the chance to explain herself, and the last wave of feverish work on the Feliner gave him the perfect excuse to avoid her. She had already tried to explain anyway, the few times that their paths had crossed, and he had not wanted to listen. It seemed to suit him to believe the worst of her, she concluded. Although she was guilty of nothing more than a secret crush, for all Lion-O cared, she might just as well have carried her fantasy to fruition. She wasn't sure which hurt most, that he thought she was capable of such an act of betrayal – and that he was likely formulating comparisons once again to her mother - or that he refused to hear her out.

Whatever Lion-O's problem, his refusal to listen to reason was feeding her fear that the other shoe was going to drop and waiting for that was akin to torture. She had seen little of him in the three days between the incident and now.

For all of Lion-O's avoidance of her, she'd done her best to sidestep Tygra. The three of them had quite a dance going on and she wasn't sure how much more she could take. She simply hoped she could avoid Tygra long enough to come up with a real excuse as to why their lessons must end. She certainly didn't want to give Lion-O anymore fuel for suspicion.

No, Lion-O didn't have to make any decrees that they stay apart this time. She was more than willing to oblige, and only wondered if Lion-O was past the point of even caring either way anymore. Even so, if he no longer minded what she did with her free time, she certainly did not want her activities – as innocent as she may know them to be – to affect Lion-O's friendship with Tygra. Felina would tread very lightly around Lion-O's wounded ego, hoping in time he would at least have the talk with her he'd promised and maybe then they could work past the mistake.

Dragging herself back to the discussion, she was vaguely aware of the discomfort radiating from Lion-O's general direction as Tygra explained the intricacies of the Feliner's construct. She could tell from his blank expression that Lion-O was having trouble following the description of the peculiar workings of the ship's systems and she guessed that he was very much driven to distraction. He was bound to cut Tygra short.

It came sooner than she expected in a brusque tone of voice that was more than what would be called for.

"As interesting as this is," he said, holding up his hand to stop Tygra mid-flow, "perhaps you'll save it for later. All I asked was how far the Feliner could travel."

"It is not quite capable of space travel, so the range is limited to the upper atmosphere at the moment. We are still working on increasing its range but figured at least normal planetary flight was a priority. Space drives, we can add later."

"Thank you," Lion-O said, a touch sardonically to Felina's mind, "that's all I wanted to know. In which case, it should easily be able to handle a long-range search and rescue mission for our three missing Thunderians."

"Not so fast," said Panthro. "Before we start making plans, we need to take her on a test flight to see if she's as good as we think she is."

Not good, Felina thought, casting Lion-O a sideways glance to take in his increasingly vexed expression. As expected, he was not happy with this setback. To her surprise, however, he put his brains to use and came up with an alternative instead of throwing a fit.

"Well, can't we do both at the same time?" he suggested.

Panthro considered this proposal. "No reason why not. As long as we take it easy."

"Great," said Lion-O. "Now we're getting somewhere at last. How soon?"

"She's ready to roll."

"Then let's not wait any longer."

"You're coming?" Panthro asked, uncertainly.

"Is that wise?" Tygra added.

For the second time in as many minutes, Felina caught herself wincing again, knowing how Lion-O was bound to react to a questioning of his decision by Tygra of all people. Again, he surprised her with what seemed like a mild reaction.

"Don't you have faith in your creation?" he said with a smile.

"Of course, but a test flight is not without certain risks. My concern is that there may be some unexpected fault that we overlooked in the Feliner's design and construction. Under those circumstances, it would be better if one of us took your place."

"And let you have all the fun? No, I've made my decision. I will be going."

"He's right, you know," said Panthro. "You are Lord of the Thundercats and if something should happen to you--"

"Then Tygra as head of the Council will take my place. That's why I'm going and he's not," Lion-O said. "Just in case, I'll leave the Sword of Omens, so if the worst does happen, you won't have too far to look for it. Besides," he added, "if something does go wrong, we'll want someone to come to our rescue that knows what to do. You don't mind filling the role of support team, do you, Tygra?"

Of course he didn't, Felina thought, watching his slight shake of the head. Then again, Lion-O had not left him much choice.

It made sense, but she had the same worries as the others. True, it may seem absurd to try to protect Lion-O from danger – it was pretty much a fact of his life that danger would follow him nearly anywhere. However, that was exactly the point in her mind. He already had enough danger on his plate with Mumm-Ra and the Mutants always lurking in the shadows, plotting his end. Need he foolishly invite more harm to himself?

She thought of voicing these concerns, but at the last moment, kept them to herself. Lion-O, she knew by now, was rather head strong and likely wouldn't appreciate the continued questioning of his decision.

"And I think Felina should come with us," he said, turning to her, after having handed over the Sword to Tygra for safekeeping. "You had nothing planned, did you?"

Felina blinked and sputtered, shocked that he would chance a glance at her much less invite her along. He must have something in mind, she concluded, but what?

"Why me? I have no technical knowledge."

The slight rise of one of Lion-O's eyebrows showed exactly what he thought of that.

"I want you to come because you have a history with the missing Thunderians. If we do find them, you may be needed."

"Me?" she questioned, still amazed he wanted to share the tiny cabin of the ship with her of all people.

Lion-O shrugged. "You met them. You know what they're like, and things about them. If they're hurt, you might be able to provide us with information we can use to save them. Plus, it's always nice to see a familiar face. You'll come?"

She was aware that the other Thundercats were watching her to gauge her reaction to this. She was also aware that she had hesitated long enough before delivering her answer. What would they make of that?

"Yes, of course I'll come, if I can be of help," she conceded softly. And since he was leaving the Sword behind, she would leave the Book as well.

Lion-O seemed satisfied with that, and as he busied himself with pre-flight preparations with Panthro, she couldn't help but wonder if he had some other reason for asking her along.



The verdant forest was gradually thinning and giving way to broad grasslands as far as the eye could see. From his position in the co-pilot's seat, Lion-O had an uninterrupted view of Third Earth's gently undulating terrain. Every now and again, they would pass over a herd of grazing quadrupeds, the like of which he had not seen before. Startled by the Feliner's shadow, they would wheel and scatter, like ants before a flood. This high up, with only the clouds for company, Lion-O was beginning to appreciate just how little they knew of their adopted world and how much was left to explore.

Even with the Feliner, it promised to be a daunting task finding their missing countrymen. The ship was already proving its worth, providing long-range scans of areas that the Lair's limited scope could only hint at. So far, they had found that a greater part of the southern landmass contained areas hostile to most life forms. Near the planet's equator, mountain ranges had formed from turbulent upheavals in the distant past and still spewed lava from cracks in the earth's surface. A pyrotechnic display had accompanied the Feliner's passing, which, while being spectacular, had also given Panthro a chance to test the ship's heat shielding. There had been an uneasy moment when they had passed through a black cloud of emissions that had caused the outside temperature to rocket to over several hundred degrees, but to everyone's relief the cabin had remained pleasantly cool.

Leaving what Panthro had dubbed the 'Volcano Zone', they had headed northwards across a sapphire-coloured ocean, its smooth surface marred in places by the rude upthrust of an underwater vent that had created an island paradise from so much barren and boiling rock. Back over land, the earth assumed a mantle of dusty yellows and browns, where the harsh summer sun had robbed the vegetation of its moisture and its life. Further on, the land turned to grey rock and lifted mighty mountains to meet the wandering ship. It was only by watching the changing landscape that their

speed could be truly appreciated. They had covered half a continent in a day and the Feliner showed no sign of Tygra's feared malfunctions.

Nor did Panthro show any sign of wanting to head for home. He was clearly having fun, and Lion-O had to admit to a little of that himself. Third Earth was full of surprises and, although they had had few readings for the Thundranium that might give them a location for the missing Thunderians, it had not been an entirely wasted day.

On a practical note, they had found at least five possible areas where a decent Thundrillium yield could be obtained. More than that, he had learnt that Third Earth was a beautiful world. Up here, the lumps and bumps of the landscape were smoothed into a carpet of colourful uniformity. The machinations of the Mutants were long forgotten as they had flown through tumbling waterfalls or admired the luxuriant array of greens of tropical jungles on isolated ocean islands.

The only stain upon this world of beauty and variety was Mumm-ra. Their travels had made Lion-O more determined than ever that his evil should not win and claim mastery once again over this land. Indeed, thinking back to his and Felina's adventure in time to discover the withered mummy's origins, he would have to make it a point to study over the information they gleaned from that again and see if there was any clue to a weakness – some way to rid them of his evil once and for all. He made a mental note.

When he ventured these thoughts, he noted that only Panthro had made the effort to agree with him. Felina had said little throughout the flight and when he glanced back at her, he found her asleep. So much for being impressed, he had thought. He didn't know how she could sleep with such sights before her. It was just wasted on some people. Perhaps if it were written in a book, she'd be more enthused.

Still, he had to admit that they had been out long enough. His stomach was reminding him that breakfast was hours ago and he hadn't eaten since. Lion-O remembered Snarf mentioning a roast earlier, and it was probably about ready to come out of the oven. He had seen so many wonders that his eyes were tired, and his brain was struggling under the strain of taking so much in. It was time to head for home.

"I'm ahead of you there," Panthro said when he suggested it to him. "We're already on our way. Once we get past Hook Mountain, it'll be plain sailing."

"Are you expecting trouble then?" Lion-O asked, sensing that there was something he was not being told.

"Well," Panthro said cautiously, "we'll have to see. I doubt it, but we'll have to take it easy."

"Why?"

"Oh, nothing to worry about."

Lion-O sighed. He knew it had been too easy. "Tell me. Saying there's nothing to worry about only makes me worry more."

Panthro grinned. "Can't get anything past you, can I? In that case…" He paused and Lion-O could tell that he was choosing his words carefully. "We're experimenting with a lighter fuel mix. Cuts down the amount of Thundrillium we use, you see. Only Tygra was concerned that it wouldn't be able to cope with lower temperatures."

This *was* something to worry about. Putting down in the snow if the fuel failed was not a prospect he relished. "How confident are you that it will work?"

"Ninety per cent," said Panthro. He pursed his lips and reconsidered. "Seventy-five. No, make it fifty per cent."

Lion-O almost started out his seat at this news and was vaguely aware of a gasp coming from the occupant seated behind them, telling him Felina was now awake and worried, too. "You mean there's a good chance we won't make it?"

Panthro shrugged unconcernedly. "And a good chance we will. Take it easy, Lion-O. Sit back in your seat and let me do the worrying."

He did as he was told with reluctance. "Isn't there another way home?"

"Nope. We're almost out of fuel as it is. This is the most direct route. Besides, what better time to test the Feliner for cold? That's what we're out here for." He looked over his shoulder at Felina. "You all right back there?"

"Yes," she replied weakly. "Panthro, if we crash, what will happen?"

"Not a lot," he said with easy confidence. "She's one tough little ship, this Feliner. We built the shell out of stuff we salvaged off our wrecked flagship, so it's space-tough. It'll probably be a rough landing, but you can't have everything."

"And there's me worrying," said Lion-O.

Panthro grinned at him. "We'll be back at the Lair before you know it. Bet you anything you like."

"Just get us home and then we'll talk about it."

At that, Panthro laughed and returned his attention to the flight controls. The Feliner was cruising at a low altitude, showing no sign that the increasing cold was affecting it. To be sure, Lion-O kept one eye on their heading and the other on the downward crawl of the temperature gauge. At minus 20 degrees, the limit seemed to have been reached, then the gauge twitched down a fraction. A light began to flash on the main control board.

"What's that?" Lion-O asked.

"Nothing to worry about," said Panthro, tapping its red-coloured casing. "Probably just a malfunction." Another light came on, this time accompanied by a warning beep. "Not so good," he said. "The fuel's starting to freeze. The engines are being starved. We're running on vapours. I'll have to put her down."

An audible whimper could be heard from Felina.

"Where?" said Lion-O, gazing out of the cabin window.

Below, snow sparkled pink as the rays of the dying sun reached out from across the miles to add a little colour to this icy land. Up ahead, the curling peak of Hook Mountain loomed in the distance. Around it stood its accompanying peaks of ice, waiting for an unwary ship to impale itself on their jagged tips. As landing places went, it was not the best of places to put down a ship that was fast running out of control.

"Hold tight," said Panthro, "we're going down!"

In that instant, Lion-O felt a wave of concern for his mate and glanced round to find that she was clinging to her seat with her eyes tightly closed. Feeling the weight of his gaze, her eyes flashed open and fixed on him. The fear he saw there caused a wave of guilt hit him. What on Thundera was he thinking, bringing her on a trip like this?

What he'd told her about her history with the Thunderians was true. But more than that, he'd wanted to spend time with her, hoping it would ease them into an amicable place for that talk he promised her. If they could handle time in a confined space together, then he reasoned they could handle time alone to discuss the shortcomings of their union.

If he was worried, however, he wished for Felina to be less so. "It'll be all right," he said, trying to reassure her. "Panthro knows what he's doing."

She accepted this information with a silent nod, but the way her hands gripped the harness strapping her to the seat told him she was anything but reassured. He turned back in his chair, at a loss for how to comfort her. From the look on Panthro's face, it was obvious that even he didn't know if they were going to make it down in one piece.

"Take a hold of those controls and help me get her nose up," he ordered. "We're losing altitude faster than I'd like and coming in at too steep an angle."

With their combined strength, the Feliner righted itself and glided in and out of the spires of ice with the lazy grace of a nectar-drunk butterfly. An unrelenting wail told Lion-O that the engines had finally died and that their fate was in the lap of the ancestors. If they landed on a flat surface out here, it would be nothing short of a

miracle. Trouble was, this close to Hook Mountain, the ground was increasingly littered with solid ice caps that could do serious damage even to the Feliner's toughened metal body. As he had expected, disaster waited around the lofty tip of a half-buried pinnacle. Another particularly large peak flashed into view and Panthro had to yank on the controls to shift course around it. With one problem solved, another presented itself. Overestimating the amount of force needed to get them out of trouble, he had set the Feliner on a collision course with Hook Mountain itself.

Lion-O held his breath as the mighty mountain filled the forward windows and only exhaled when Panthro had deftly managed to maneuver the ship out of harm's way. It was a close thing and as it staggered by, the Feliner's starboard wing clipped the edge of the glacier. The ship's progress was abruptly halted, and it bumped to rest on the snowy slopes of Hook Mountain.

"Well, thank Jaga that's over," said Panthro. "Everyone all right?"

Felina mumbled something from the back and Lion-O added his own agreement.

"What now?" was his next question.

Panthro smiled. "We have a support team, remember?" He punched the communicator only to be met with a wall of ear-splitting static. Adjusting the frequency only succeeded in changing the pitch of the whine and finally he closed the channel. "Temporary hitch, that's all," he said in answer to Lion-O's inquiring gaze.

"You mean we're stuck here?"

"For the time being," said Panthro. "Tygra will realise something's up when we don't call in. Funny thing that, the communicator not working. Must be a storm brewing." To back up his assertion, he gazed heavenward out of the cabin window at the darkening sky. "We should be safe enough here till it passes."

"But what about--" The words died on Lion-O's lips as a shudder passed through the ship and somewhere outside a low rumble sounded not too far away. "What was that?"

"Uh-oh," said Panthro. "Avalanche!"

Lion-O followed his pointing finger to where a giant wave of white was washing down the mountain carrying all before it. Great lumps of snow bounded before the body of the surge, eagerly rushing ahead to announce the arrival of something much more deadly.

"That landing of ours must have tipped it off," said Panthro. "What a sight!"

"We're about to be buried beneath a ton of snow!" said Lion-O. "There's nothing pretty about that."

Panthro shook his head dismissively. "It'll pass us by, mark my words."

Lion-O wasn't sure how he knew, but a moment later the race of snow had altered course and was rapidly speeding down the slopes away from them. The outer fringes still came close, however, and the Feliner was swept up in a dizzying carousel ride that spun the ship round and round until a mass of snow brought it to a halt, just several dozen feet before a menacing crevasse.

When his brains had unscrambled, Lion-O found himself staring at snow piled high on the Feliner’s nose up to the cabin windows. He didn't need Panthro to tell him that they were now partially buried. Worse still was Panthro's announcement that the impact had knocked out the last of the Feliner's functioning systems. The ship was dead and cold, and likely to get colder as the outside temperature permeated its metal body and insulation. And it was only going to get colder overnight.

"Pity you didn't bring the Sword of Omens," Panthro said. "With a little help from our friends, we could be out of here in no time."

"Sadly, that's not an option," said Lion-O. "Nor is sitting here waiting to freeze to death. I have a better idea."

"Yes?"

"We stay overnight with Snowman. His home isn't too far from here."

Panthro gave that idea the thumbs-up. "Good thinking. We should be able to radio the Lair from there."

"If I can remember where it is," Lion-O said with a frown. "It was somewhere on Hook Mountain, I know that."

Thankfully, the problem had resolved itself by the time he had helped Panthro lever the cabin roof open. Snowman was heading across the snow towards them, ice lance in hand and mounted as ever on the sturdy Snowmeow. The cat padded up to the downed ship and sniffed it with suspicion.

"Greetings, Lion-O," said Snowman. "It has been too long. What brings you here to Hook Mountain?"

Lion-O had just finished helping a somewhat reluctant and very shaky Felina out of her restraints, and in spite of his roller coaster of emotions over the last few days, managed to smile down at her genuinely when she clung to him a moment. He was glad they were all right and gave her shoulders a slight squeeze before releasing her.

"Fuel problems," said Lion-O, gesturing to the half-buried ship. "We had to crash land and I'm afraid might have set off this avalanche."

Snowman nodded sagely. "Such things are not uncommon on Hook Mountain. The heat of high summer makes the stability of the snow hard to judge."

"This is high summer?" said Felina through chattering teeth. "It's freezing out here."

"This is mild," said Snowman. "The winters here can be bitter." His attention switched back to their predicament. "May I be of some service?"

Panthro scratched his scalp. "Not unless you've got a Thundertank to pull us out and a couple of gallons of Thundrillium fuel mix to get us on our way."

Snowman digested this news soberly. "All I can offer is my home. You are welcome to stay the night for such ventures as you propose are best undertaken in the light of day and as you can see," he said, gesturing to the skies, "dusk is at hand and a blizzard is blowing in over the mountain."

"Thank you for your hospitality," said Lion-O. "We are most grateful."

"Then come," said Snowman, wheeling his mount around. "A hearty meal and blazing fire will soon restore your spirits."

It felt like a long trudge, although Lion-O supposed that any amount of time spent out in these freezing temperatures would seem like an age. Felina in particular was feeling the effects of the cold. He had noticed her shivering and felt sympathy but knew there was little he could do about it. Had he a cloak to hand, he would have given it to her. But all he had was the clothes he stood up in. They had not prepared for these conditions, much less the prospect of a night away from home, so they would just have to do the best they could.

After a trek during which his legs lost all feeling, the spires of Snowman's abode finally came into view. It looked a little different to the last time Lion-O had seen it and some of the uppermost towers showed definite signs of having melted. The hazards of the changing seasons, Lion-O supposed. Come the winter, Snowman would have plenty of time for repair and restoration.

At their approach, the drawbridge slammed down and welcomed them into the sparkling interior. Melting snow had created dripping ice stalactites in the main hall that glowed in the candlelight of the chandeliers. It was all very fairytale, but Lion-O was in no mood to appreciate it. He staggered past the finery and was grateful for the increasing warmth that seeped into his cold body. When Snowman stopped at a room and pushed open a door, a rush of hot air hit him full in the face and brought the blood back to his stiff cheeks.

"Your room," explained Snowman. "I hope you and your lady will be comfortable here."

Lion-O took one step in and stopped. The chamber was warm and spacious and had a double bed. He could feel Felina staring at him, but here in front of a most gracious host was no time to start airing their differences.

"Yes, this will suit us very well," Lion-O said. "You have our thanks, Snowman."

"It is the least I can do," he said. "While you freshen up, I will prepare a feast. Come when you hear the gong. Now, friend Panthro, your quarters are next door."

So saying, he pulled the door shut with a large, bear-like hand and left Lion-O alone with Felina. The situation was intensely awkward. This was the first time he had allowed himself to be alone with her since the incident. He'd used the time to mull over their whole situation, not just the latest incident, and he did have an indication of where he stood. But he hadn't planned on dealing with it here, although it would be a long night either way, he suspected.

"You take the bed," he said. "I'll make do with the couch."

He tested it for comfort and found it to be soft and yielding. It promised a better night than the Feliner had offered. For her part, Felina had accepted this compromise without comment and sank down on the bed to remove her boots. Lion-O watched as she rubbed her cold toes and decided it was time to state his case.

"For the sake of outward appearances, Felina, we'll have to grin and bear this situation," he said. "Snowman is a good friend and a close ally."

"I know," she said. "I'll try not to embarrass you."

"Thank you. I appreciate that."

She turned and eyed him with a bit of a forlorn look but said nothing before going back to the task of warming herself.

He went about making himself comfortable on the soft sofa, taking a cue from Felina to slog off his own boots as well. The heat of the fire felt good on the numb extremities.

Awkward silence settled in and he knew he owed her the talk he'd promised, even if Snowman's castle hadn't been his ideal place to hash it out in. Lion-O had to admit he was impressed that she hadn't pushed or needled him the moment they were alone together. But then, aside from a few stolen moments where she'd gotten the courage to try to plead her case in the prior days, she hadn't been much of anything like herself.

He knew her slip had also caused her considerable anxiety and embarrassment as well, but even knowing this, he couldn't just simply forgive her the mistake and move on like it'd never happened. It affected him in ways he couldn't quite describe, and it had really been the death of the fresh start, what he had viewed as their last chance to make their marriage work. He saw no reason to keep her waiting any longer. She deserved to know where he stood once and for all.

Days had passed, and no matter how he'd weighed things, he kept coming back to the same conclusion. It was, he'd determined, the only way they could weather their rocky relationship and still have a shot at remaining friendly. How she may react to the news, he could only guess. Though part of him wondered if she might even be a little relieved. There was just one way to find out.

Remaining seated, he cleared his throat hesitantly before calling to her. She turned, pausing from the task of rubbing one of her feet, to look to him expectantly. He patted the seat beside him, beckoning her to sit.

Without words, she complied, looking to him with measured uncertainty as she took her place there. Lion-O tried to muster a smile, but it faltered and waned before it could really form on his lips. There wasn't going to be an easy way to begin, so taking a deep breath, he decided to just get it all out in the open.

"Felina, as I'd promised, we need to talk about…us," he began, to which she simply slowly nodded, and he thought he detected a hint of dread in her expression. "I've been giving the subject a lot of thought, and I can't get away from that fact that, despite all our efforts, we can't seem to get along – we're not connecting. In fact, we seem to be driving each other farther away. Given that, I think it's best we admit defeat and go our separate ways. This isn't going to work."

Felina sucked in a sharp breath, and he knew whatever she'd been dreading, this announcement was far worse. He couldn't imagine her reacting any different if he'd smacked her across the face, and it hurt him to see her in such pain. In his heart, he knew this was probably how she would react – the hope of relief had been more wishful thinking on his part as if a breakup could ever be that quick and easy. Truth be told, admitting defeat cut like a blade for him as well.

He watched helplessly as she struggled wordlessly for a time, the firelight casting shadows on her face that only intensified her reaction.

"W-wait," she stammered, her tone strained. "You said we'd talk. This is just you making a decision without hearing my side. Please, hear me out."

Lion-O closed his eyes for a moment. He had a pretty good idea what she was going to say, for he'd already come to the same conclusion himself. Of course, nothing had actually happened between her and Tygra. Tygra, for one, would never stray from

Cheetara. And even if Tygra had been unattached, he'd never betray a friend – it wasn't in him.

But that revelation didn't change the conclusion he'd drawn, for this fantasy of hers was merely the last straw. There had been so much more before that, and it added up. And now, knowing about her secret desires for Tygra made it all but impossible for him to touch her again, without wondering if she was responding to him or wishing he were someone else.

However, he'd listen to her if only for her benefit.

"Okay," he conceded softly.

She turned, tucking her legs underneath her as she faced him, and laid a hand upon his shoulder. "I swear on the Code nothing happened between us. I just let a silly fantasy go too far. I was lonely, and spending a lot of time with Tygra, and my mind wandered. It meant nothing," she said in a rush, and he couldn't bear to look her in the eye.

"Oh, it can't end like this over one word. We can work on this. We can get through it. Don't give up," she begged when he had not response.

He shook his head slowly, while feeling her grip on his shoulder increase. "It's not just about that, Felina," he gently explained. "I hate giving up on us more than anything. Giving up goes against my very nature. But what I'd hate more," he added, plucking the courage to glance her way and catching her glistening eyes, "is that we'd end up hating one another if we go on. I loved you, Felina. I don't want to resent you."

She gasped and went wide-eyed, sinking back on her heels, but he looked away again when he spotted tears spilling over onto her cheeks.

She was unwilling to accept it and sprung off the couch in favor of positioning herself before him on her knees so that he'd have to face her. She took his face into her hands, ensuring that he look at her.

"No, no. The fresh start – it was wonderful – it was working before…before that. We can go back there. We can have that again and not mess it up. I've learned from my mistakes. Please. Give us one more chance. No more games. It'll be different this time, I swear."

She just wasn't getting it, he thought sadly. He felt hot tears sting at his eyes, as he gently gathered her up onto his lap and held her to him. He stroked her hair and kissed the top of her head lightly. "I'll always care about you, but this…it's for the best. You'll see that too, in time."

She sobbed into his chest, voicing her disagreement with his conclusion between sobs. No, they couldn't really split up – not in the sense of no longer being husband and wife. Tradition didn't allow for it. But an emotional divorce is what they needed, he knew, or they ran the real risk of not being capable of even a friendship in the future. And that was his hope, that in time, they could be friends. Perhaps without the pressure and expectations put upon them – and having more time to mature themselves – they could even be more than that again someday. But for now, their efforts to get close and be happy romantically were jeopardizing their chances at every turn. He was sure – this would be for the best in the long run. He hoped she would understand.

She lifted her head up and rested her forehead on his. "But I love you. Please," she begged in a near-whisper, still unwilling to let go.

In his heavy heart, he'd long realized that love was simply not enough sometimes, and it was a hard revelation to come by. If that were all it took, they certainly wouldn't be in the place they were now, as clearly they felt love for one another. As tempting as it was to give in to her pleading, he steeled himself to retain his resolve. Their past history loomed strong, and it overrode his willingness to forgive it all and grant her request. He merely hoped this didn't backfire and she ended up hating him for the decision.

"I'm sorry," was all he could manage amid his own grief, his voice cracking with emotion.

This only elicited more sobs out of her. He held her tight while his own tears threatened to spill over. Further heartbreak for both of them was spared by a knock on the door as Panthro put in an appearance.

"Everything all right?" he asked. "You didn't come downstairs when the gong sounded."

The struggling couple quickly tried to dry their eyes and regain their composure.

Panthro looked rather uncomfortable. "Oh, uh, sorry to interrupt."

"We didn't hear it," said Lion-O. "We'll be there shortly. Extend our apologies for our tardiness to Snowman."

"Will do," the panther replied before ducking back out, making little effort to hide his relief.

"You go ahead," Felina said softly as she slid off his lap. "I'll be there soon. I-I need to freshen up."

Lion-O lingered a moment before nodding his acceptance of this plan and heading out to the dinner he was no longer quite so hungry for.



Felina stood in the bathroom of their bedroom suite trembling and trying her best to get a hold of herself.

Her mind raced, going over the conversation Lion-O and she had just had, and unbelieving of what she heard. Though part of her was angry that this 'talk' was little more than a decree on his part to the end of their romantic relationship, the larger part of her felt simply defeated and devastated.

She sorely regretted all the time she'd spent wishing he'd been different, envying Cheetara and Tygra, and foolishly putting her energy into petty arguments and paybacks that only undermined their marriage. As much as it hurt her to admit it, Lion-O was right. They'd made a number of missteps that simply had added up to too much to try to surmount without risking coming out of it loathing one another. Being right didn't make it hurt any less, she was certain. The sheer heartbreak was unbearable, as if she hadn't realized how much she'd loved him until now. Now that she'd lost him.

And to think, he'd finally said those words she'd longed to hear from him, only it was in the past tense. He had loved her all along, and she'd been foolish enough to drive him away. Yes, he may have had a part in the failure of their relationship to properly thrive, but at the moment, Felina couldn't help but feel it was her that bore the most blame for its destruction. She didn't know if she'd ever forgive herself, but at the same time, wasn't sure if she could forgive him for giving up. One more chance was all he had to give her, and she was sure she could have held up her end of the bargain. No more games. No more daydreaming and idealizing. No more wishing Lion-O were some romanticized dream lover. It would be different, if only he'd let it.

It was as if that slip had been the cry that set off an avalanche, one that sent a build-up of mistakes cascading down until it left their floundering relationship dead and buried. And she mourned that, as imperfect as it was, her mind going over their history together and the times they shared both good and bad. There had been a lot of good times, she knew, and the thought of them made her smile a little in spite of her sorrow.

That was soon replaced by the weight of bitter irony and the heart wrenching realization that those were times she may never experience again. If only she hadn't spent so much time being negative. When they weren't feeling pressure and just relaxed, they really had some great times. But alas, her behavior had really left Lion-O with little other choice as to where to go with their relationship.

She wept anew, feeling pity for herself and for her future. Felina felt sick knowing she'd helped land herself in the loveless arranged marriage she'd always feared. It

wouldn't be a first in Thundercat history for such an arrangement to go awry and shift into a place where the couple merely coexisted, tolerating one another. But she'd prayed that fate would not befall her. She'd hoped that even with the added obstacles she and Lion-O faced, that they could forge a love strong and true. That dream was fast withering away.

She leaned heavily on the sink and shook her head, as if to banish the tortured thoughts and bittersweet memories from her mind.

Felina dared not think about the possibility that she could be with child, preferring to cling to the hope that their last and final lovemaking session hadn't been enough to merit success. It was too soon to tell, of course, and only time would reveal if she had yet another nasty surprise awaiting her – to go through a pregnancy alone, for all practical sense of it. Or at least, go through it in a fashion she hadn't considered until moments ago, adding to the litany of life experiences that seemed to always turn out nothing like she'd dreamed they would. No, she'd worry about that later. It was too much for her to consider any further.

Felina concentrated on clearing her mind and taking deep, even breaths. She had to attend that dinner and face them. She'd promised Lion-O she wouldn't embarrass him tonight, and she meant to keep her word. Perhaps, she would show him she was capable of grace and maturity, and maybe he would see and reconsider. Maybe she was just fooling herself. He did say he loved her, in the past sense of the term. It was probably already too late to undo what had been done. Regardless, she could not hide away in the bathroom all evening.

Having calmed herself enough to stop crying, she splashed some water on her face and made her best effort to do what she could to look fresh and unstressed for her big entrance.



Lion-O was about to glance up at the clock again, from where he sat at the massive dining table inside Snowman's castle, when movement at the door caught his eye. His jaw went lax when he realized it was Felina standing there, looking considerably radiant given the state she was in when he'd left her.

"Felina, welcome!" Snowman boomed from his perch at the head of the table. "Come, sit down. Eat. There's plenty for all." He made a grand, sweeping gesture with his hand to which she smiled.

"Sorry I'm late," she apologized pleasantly, while taking her seat beside Lion-O.

“Don’t worry,” Panthro assured her. “We know how women are about primping.”

“That’s right,” she replied with a wink.

Lion-O studied her, and although he could see faint remnants of their sorrowful encounter etched on her face, he was impressed at how well she’d pulled herself together. It was then she leaned in close enough for him to hear her whisper.

“I said I wouldn’t embarrass you.”

He managed a faint smile and felt a pang of guilt stab at him, causing him to almost second guess his big decision. Could he have been too rash? Maybe they could try one more time…

“I already called into the Lair,” Panthro was saying. “With the storm that’s coming up, Tygra won’t be out ‘til the morning. So, we’re definitely in for the night. Thank Jaga for good friends,” he added, raising his goblet in a toast to Snowman.

After the meal and some catching up with Snowman, it was time to turn in. Lion-O could tell Panthro was curious about what was going on between the couple, but it would have to wait. He didn’t have the energy to get into it twice in one night.

They reached their suite, and Lion-O dreaded being alone with Felina again. At first, it seemed as though she was content to ready herself for bed, respecting their separate arrangements. But then she paused before getting in bed to say something to him.

“I’m sorry,” she began. “For everything. And I understand. But please, don’t exile yourself to that couch. There’s plenty of room here,” she added gesturing to what was indeed, quite an expanse of bed. Big enough for them to sleep far enough apart and still be comfortable.

He crossed the room to stand before her, and stroked her cheek softly, as he shook his head. His wavering early in the evening had given him pause, but for now, he thought it best to stick with his original decision.

“It’s not your fault. I can’t give you what you need. I wish it could be different.”

His heart went out to her, for he never wanted to hurt her like this. She had tried so hard to be strong at dinner, and it was admirable. The failure of their relationship was hard for him to take as well, and he wasn’t sure that, if he allowed them another chance, that he could stand it in the event that attempt also failed.

She responded by raising herself up on her toes and letting her lips touch his. He almost responded to the kiss, but his body stiffened, and he withdrew. It would be better, he knew, if they had a clean break and didn’t cave in to any lingering desire they

may have for one another now. It would be so easy to give in to that feeling and spend the night warm in each other's arms, especially considering how vulnerable they both were in the aftermath of the break-up. But doing that would only make what he sadly believed to be inevitable that much more difficult. And if they hadn't already succeeding in creating new life, he didn't want to risk making it all but a guarantee – not now, under these circumstances.

It took all his willpower to turn away from her and settle onto the couch for the night.



At dawn's first light, Lion-O's eyes opened. It had been a long, sleepless night. The couch had not been that comfortable to sleep on after all. It didn't help that his mind was weighted down with not only his personal problems, but those missing Thunderians plagued him. His only hope was that the Feliner would be back up and running sooner rather than later.

Sitting up, he did his best to stretch the kinks out of his stiffened back and watched the glowing coals in the fireplace. With a grunt he got up to stoke new life into the fire and threw a fresh log on for good measure before dressing. He thought Felina might appreciate warmth to rise into, as he glanced at her slumbering form. They would have to get going soon if Tygra was true to his word, and most likely, he would prove dependable as ever.

By the time he was ready to rouse her, it was warm enough in the chamber to be pleasant. He made his way to her bedside and paused for a moment to watch her sleep. Lion-O's mind drifted back to the night they'd spent in the Tabbot Inn and he knew he'd miss the little things, like watching her sleep. She always seemed so contended when she slept, and that in turn gave him comfort.

However, he could tarry no longer. He reached out and gently shook her by the shoulder.

"Time to go," he said quietly, when she opened her eyes.



The evening storm had made it difficult to re-locate the Feliner, and Panthro's hints that the Sword of Omens would have been useful in that instance did not improve Lion-O's mood, which had darkened with this latest obstacle. But thanks to Snowmeow's keen tracking abilities, not to mention his love of digging in the snow, they soon found their mark buried a foot beneath the fresh snowfall.

At least they weren't cold, either. Snowman had been nice enough to lend them heavy furs to further insulate them where their natural coats failed.

No sooner had they found the Feliner when the Thunder Tank sped up, and his fellow Thundercats leapt out of it.

"Exactly *how* did this happen?" Cheetara asked.

Lion-O bristled at the trace of amusement in her voice, as though she found the incident somehow amusing. "Our fuel froze. We crashed and set off an avalanche. Then it got buried under fresh snow. It was only thanks to Snowman that we had a bed for the night."

He felt her studying him critically. "Not a very good night though, from the look of you. You look exhausted, Lion-O."

He suspected that she was fishing for information, having heard Snowman mention that Lion-O had been sharing a bedroom with Felina. If she were, then she would get nothing more from him. It was already galling to be in this situation where they had had to be rescued. Revealing the details of a night spent tossing and turning would be another indignity that he had determined to spare himself. He supposed they'd find out sooner or later what transpired, but he was in no mood to stand around in the snow rehashing it now.

Still, she, along with Tygra, had been good to their word, and had appeared at first light.

"You know how it is, trying to sleep in a strange place," he muttered as an excuse, though afterward, he hoped Snowman hadn't overheard and took the comment the wrong way. With measured relief, Lion-O noticed it appeared that he hadn't. Furthermore, Cheetara seemed willing to drop it in favor of getting down to business.

The Thundertank made light work of heaving the Feliner from its icy tomb and now Tygra and Panthro were assessing the damage. Their expressions as they exited the cabin did not give him much hope.

"Not good," said Tygra. "Looks like the impact did a fair amount of damage."

"How long to repair it?" Lion-O asked.

Panthro shrugged. “A week or so, I guess. We’ll have to strip her down and find out exactly what’s gone wrong.”

Lion-O cursed, much to Cheetara’s disapproval. “Sorry,” he said, “but it’s how I feel. It’s another setback. At this rate, by the time we do find those missing Thunderians, they’ll be as old as the hills.”

“Another week won’t make much difference,” Tygra said reasonably. “If they have been in the proximity of Thundranium this long, I don’t rate their chances very highly anyway.”

“Yes, you’re quite right, Tygra,” Lion-O conceded, checking his agitation. “I just had hopes that we have found them by now.”

“We will,” said Cheetara, placing her hand gently on his shoulder. “I have a strong feeling that they are alive and well.”

“Feelings are all very well,” said Panthro, “but right now we’d like something a little more practical, like some help here to get the Feliner hitched up the Thundertank.”

Lion-O took the hint and pitched in. If nothing else, it took his mind off his other problems. A mutual problem they shared, however, sprang to mind as he worked. “We really need to keep tabs on the Mutants and Mumm-Ra, though. They’re onto what we’re doing, and you know they’re going to try to thwart our efforts.”

“Already ahead of you on that,” Tygra assured him. “We’ve got the Kittens on a little sleuthing detail. Who knows, they might even unwittingly help us find them. Wouldn’t that be ironic?”

Lion-O mumbled his agreement and was relieved when the Feliner was finally hooked up and ready to go. He took the front seat beside Panthro in the front of the Tank, leaving Felina, Tygra and Cheetara to endure the ride in the back. It wasn’t long before Panthro’s curiosity got the better of him.

“I don’t mean to pry,” he began. “But something intense was going on between you two last night. Wanna talk about it?”

Lion-O fixed his eyes on the sparkling snow outside. “Not really,” he answered flatly.

Panthro, it seemed, was not going to take the hint. “You gotta pick your battles, Lion-O. I’ve said it before, but you both make things more difficult than they have to be.”

Lion-O sighed. “Well don’t worry. There won’t be any more fighting.” *There won’t be any more anything*, he added silently. In the light of day, and seeing how raw the hurt still was for Felina, he wondered if his hope of forging a friendship with her was as

hopeless as their attempt at romance had been. She'd been withdrawn and quiet all morning, not even trying to put on the front she had the prior evening at dinner. He fully considered the option for the first time that perhaps they would come away with nothing salvaged. Only time would tell. "We took care of it."

"Good!" Panthro said, beaming. Lion-O supposed the old panther thought his advice had actually done some good. He wished it had. "Now, maybe we can all focus on other things for a while. Like getting home to some of Snarf's cooking. I'm starving."

It was true, they'd left before Snowman could offer them up a hearty breakfast and that did sound good. Then it would be back to work on the Feliner and pushing forward with the effort to find the others.

Yes, it was going to be a busy time ahead, and Lion-O was grateful for it. He was sure all he and Felina needed was time to heal, and they would be fine. But the work would allow him the shelter he needed to avoid temptation and the risk of wavering on his decision to break up.

It was, he told himself once again, for the best.

I'm riding shotgun down the avalanche

Tumbling and falling down the avalanche

So be quiet tonight the stars shine bright

On this mountain of new fallen snow

But I will raise up my voice into the void

You have left me nowhere to go

I love you so much and it's so bizarre

A mystery that goes on and on and on

This is the best thing and the very most hard

And we don't get along

After countless appeals we keep spinning our wheels

On this mountain of new fallen snow

So I let go the catch and we are over the edge

You have left me nowhere to go

I'm riding shotgun down the avalanche

Sometimes you make me lose my will to live

And just become a beacon for your soul

But the past is stronger than my will to forgive

Forgive you or myself, I don't know

I'm riding shotgun down the avalanche

Tumbling and falling down the avalanche

So be quiet tonight be sure to step lightly

On this mountain of new fallen snow

But I will raise up my voice into the void

You have left me nowhere to go

-- Shotgun down the Avalanche, Shawn Colvin