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WELCOME TO THIRD EARTH!

Welcome to the latest Thundercats Annual, a feline extravaganza packed to the whiskers with action, stories and fabulous pictures of your favourite heroes, the mighty Thundercats! Amongst the goodies this year we have a seasonal strip story called **The Homecoming** in which Snarf gets more help at Rammastide than he bargained for, and a Third Earth-shattering text epic entitled *The Last Thundercats Story . . .!* Intrigued to find out what could possibly befall our champions to make this their last tale? Then read on and discover as the Thundercats adventure continues!

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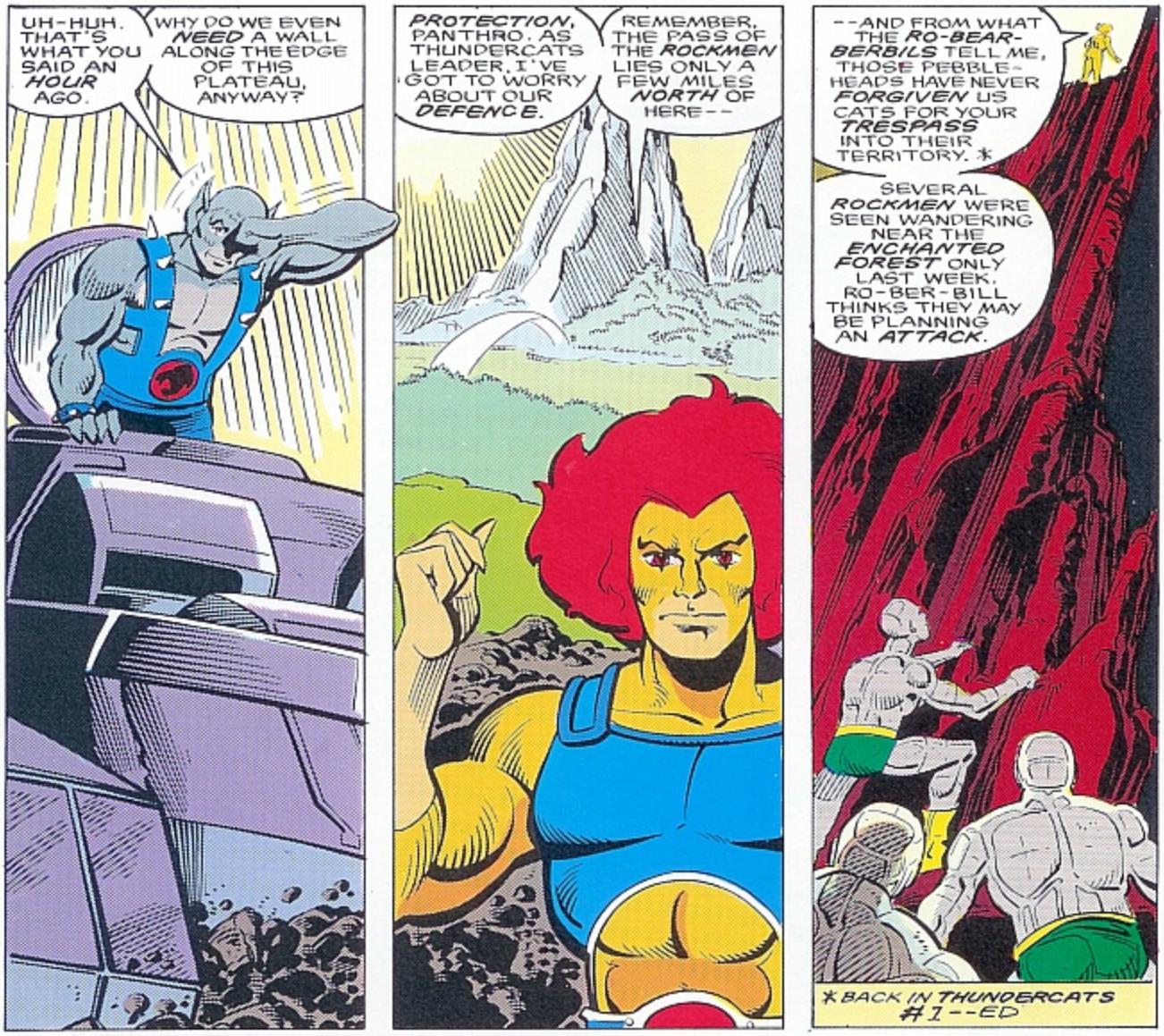
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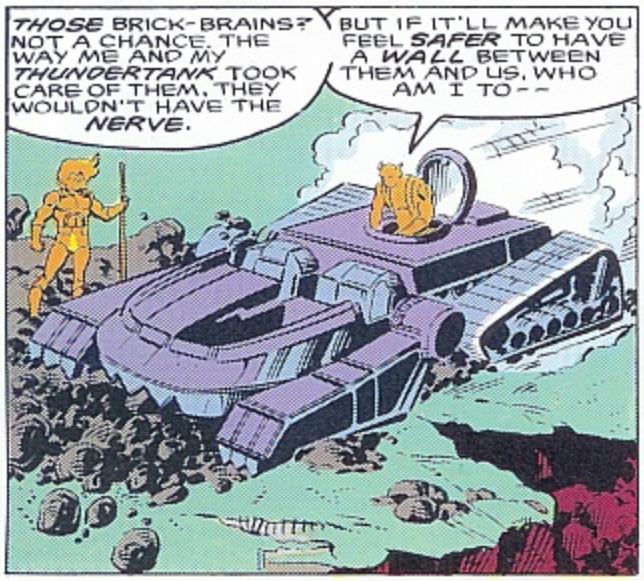
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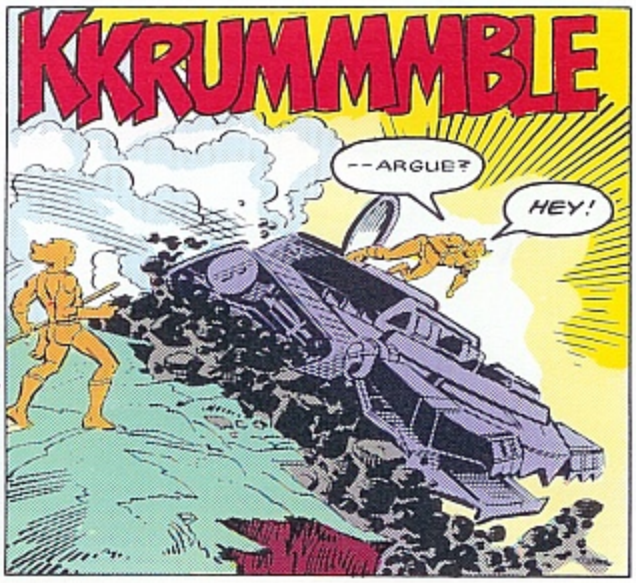
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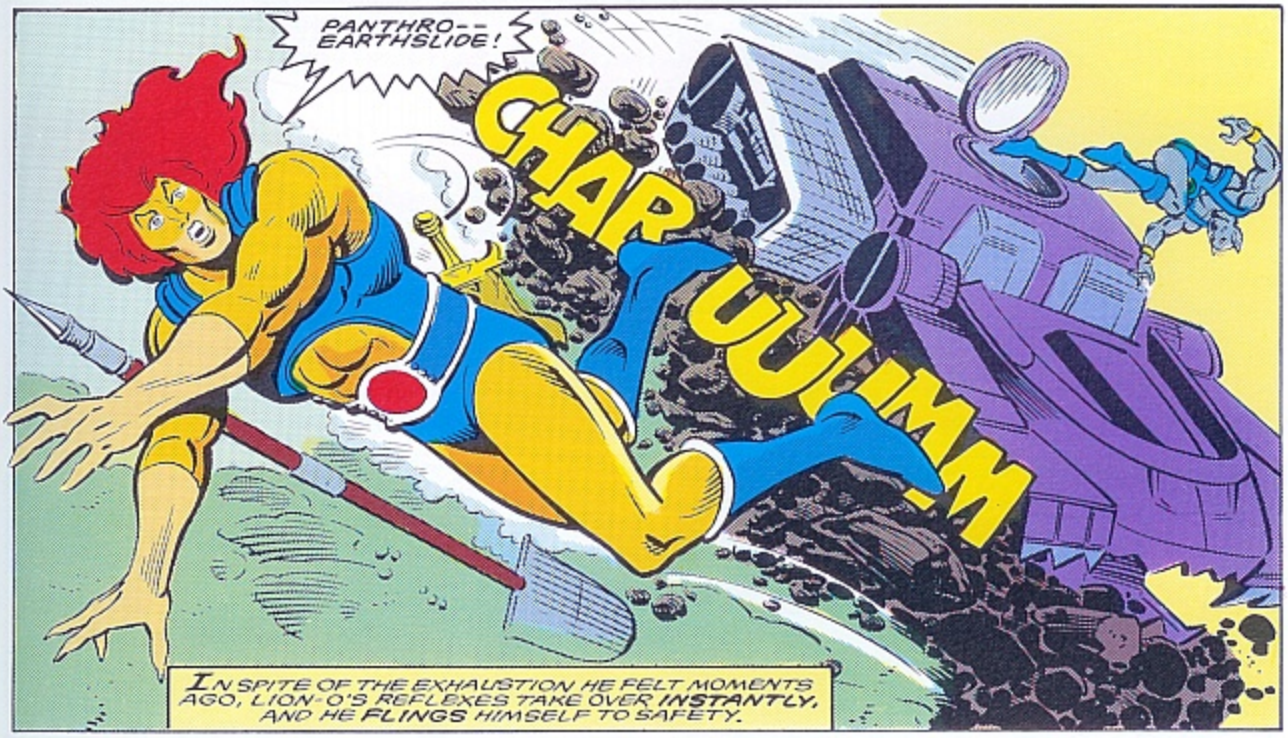
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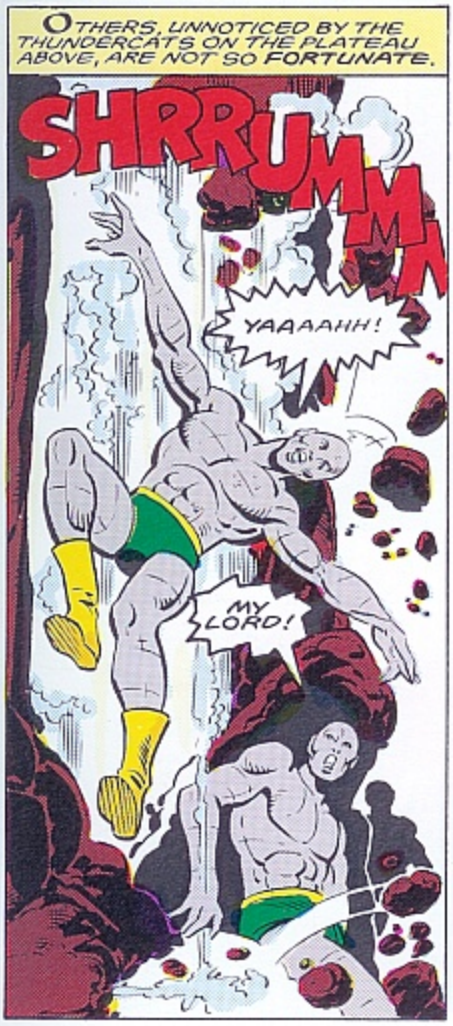




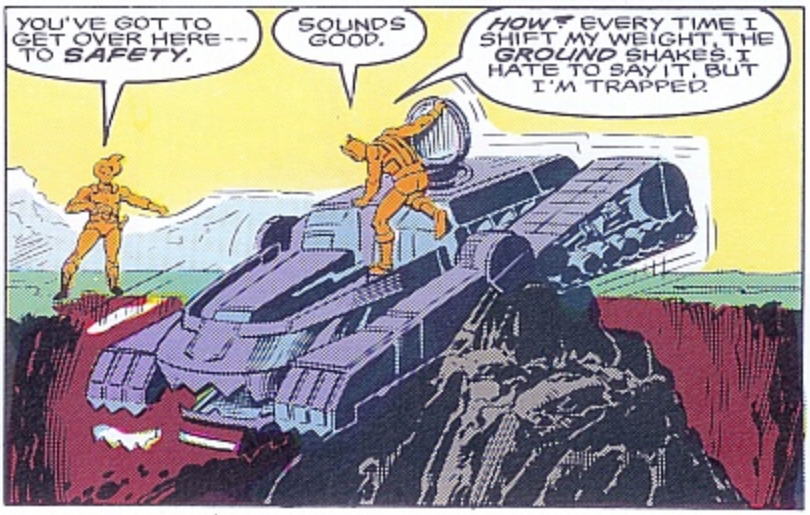


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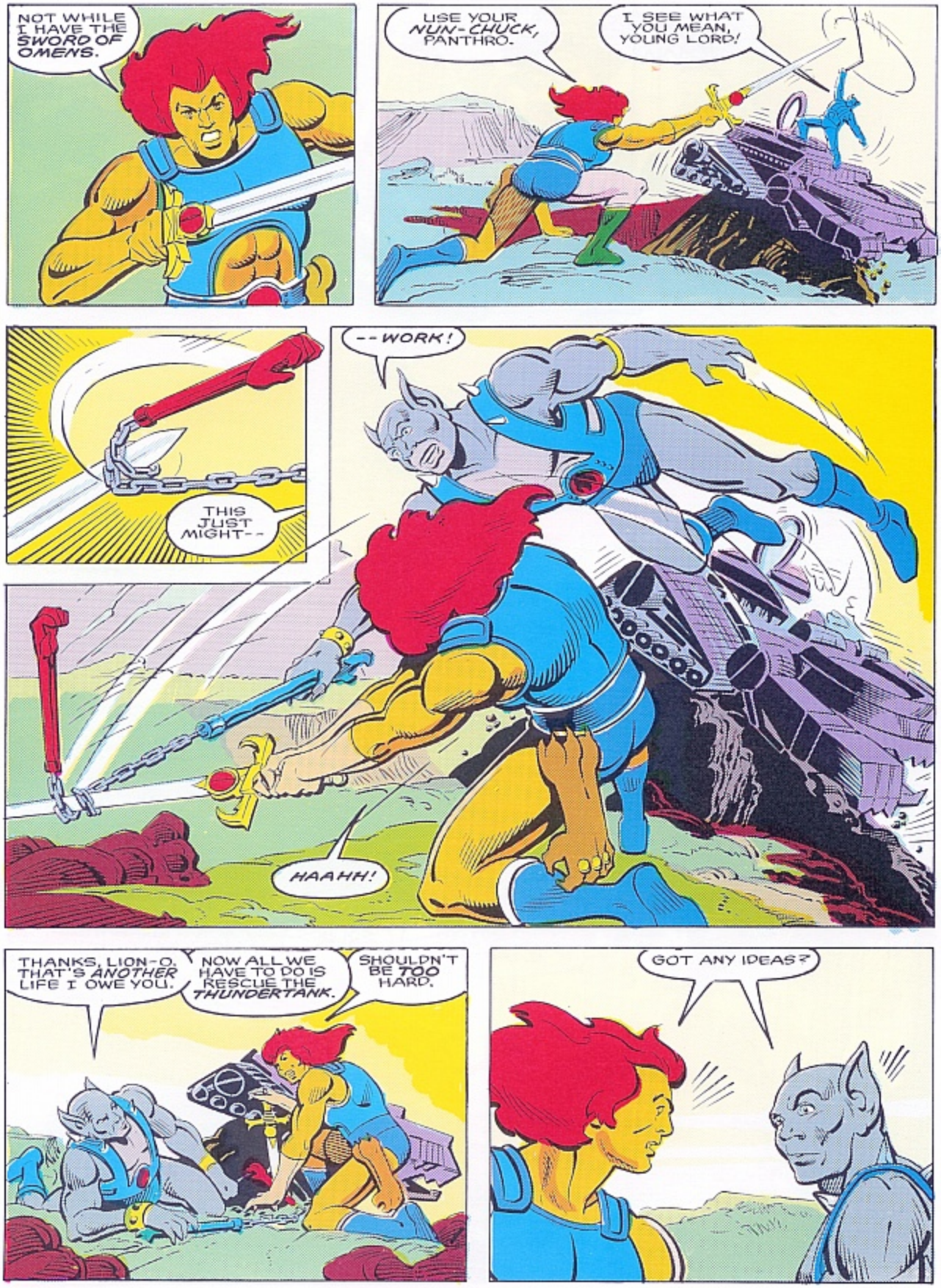




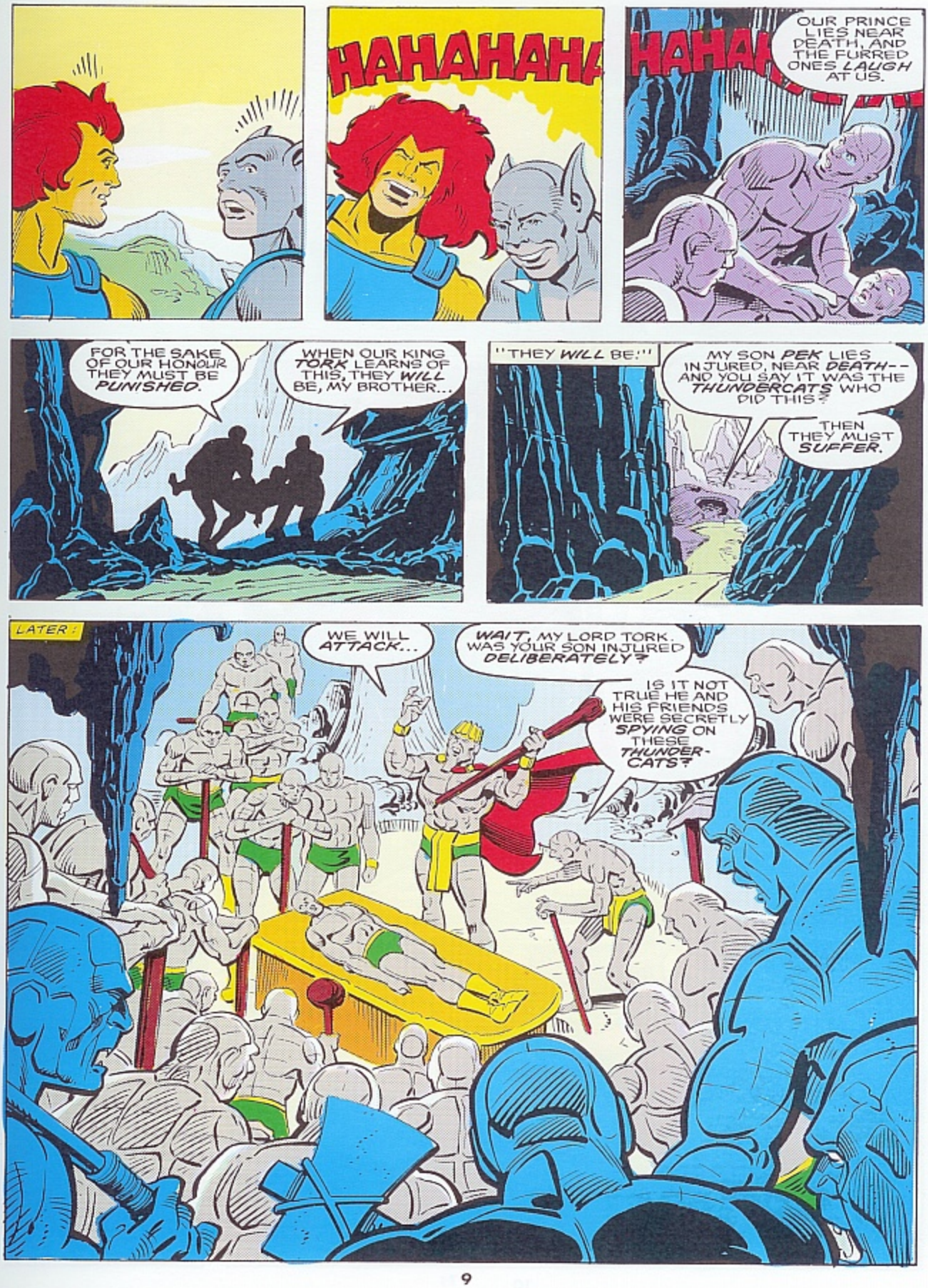




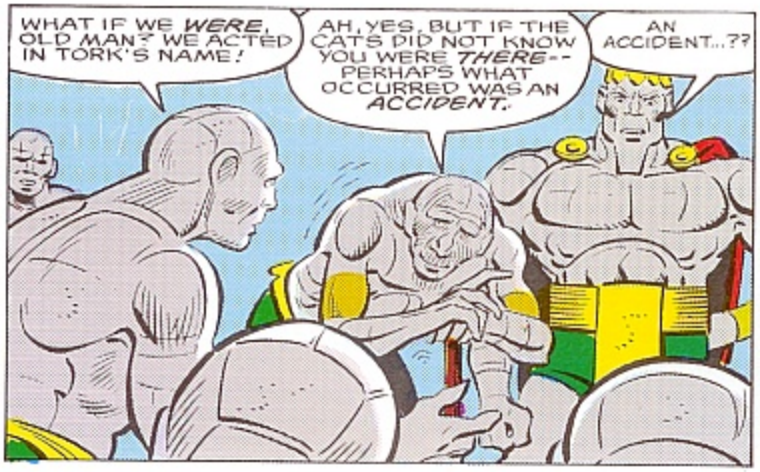
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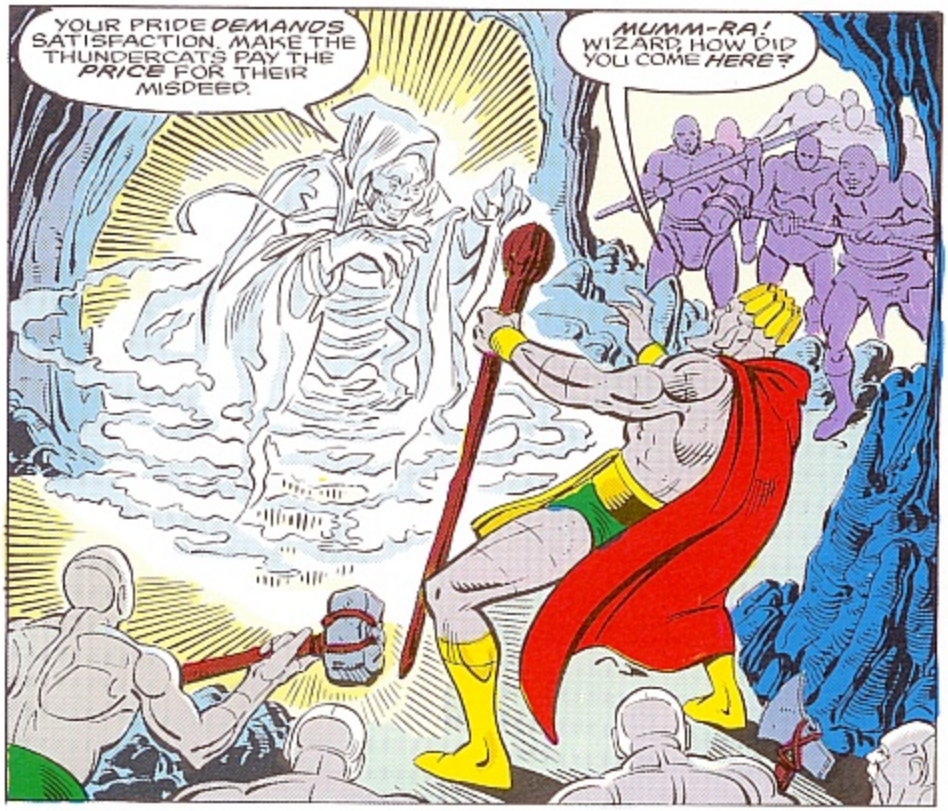
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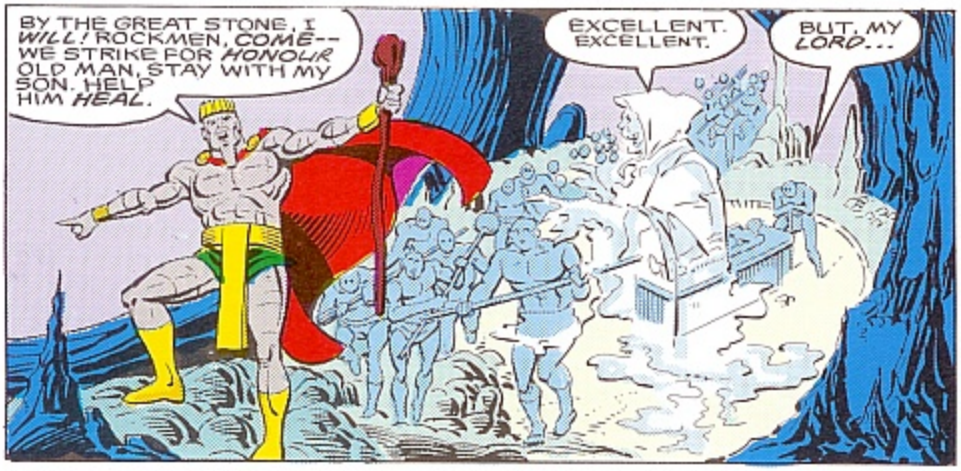
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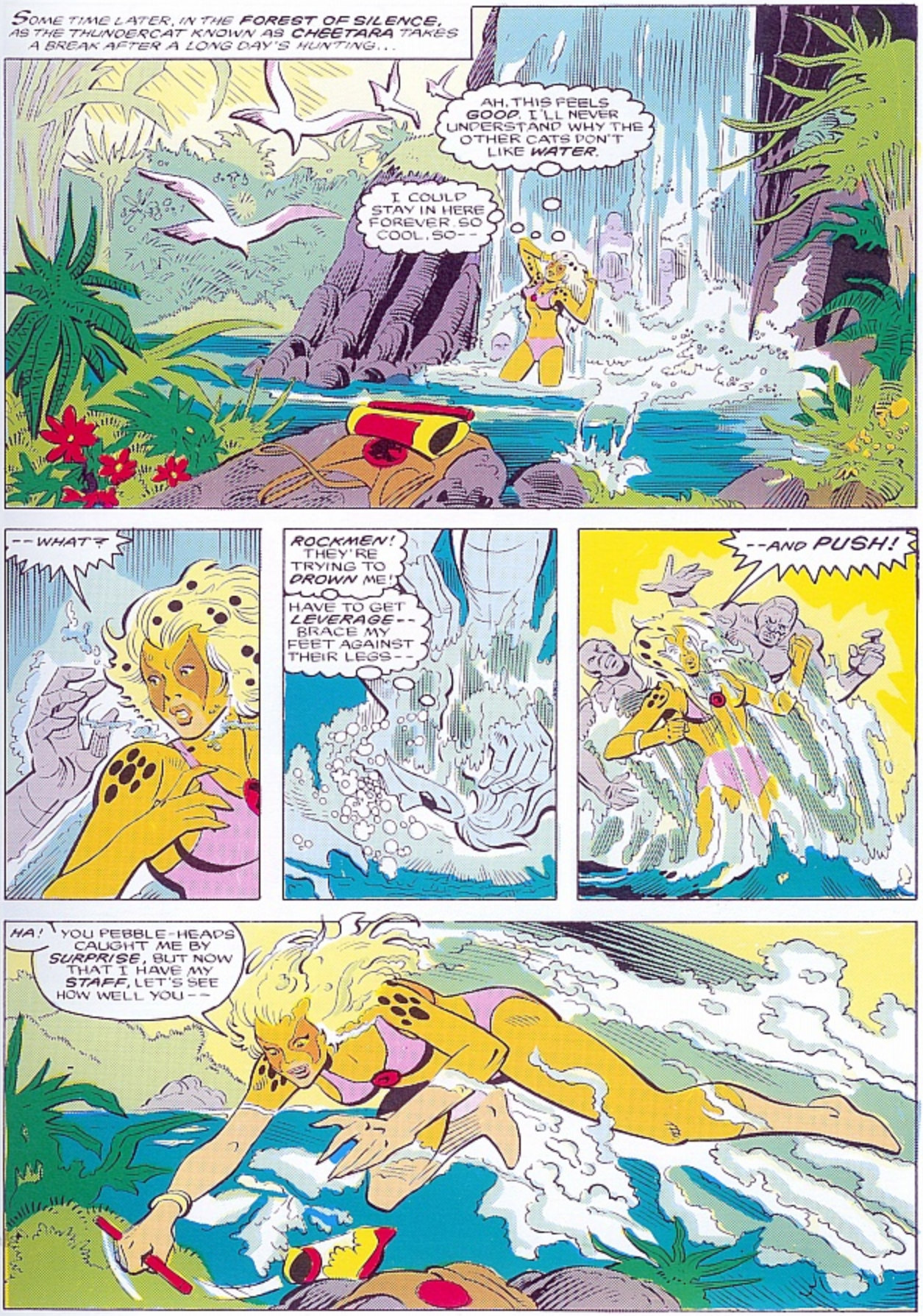




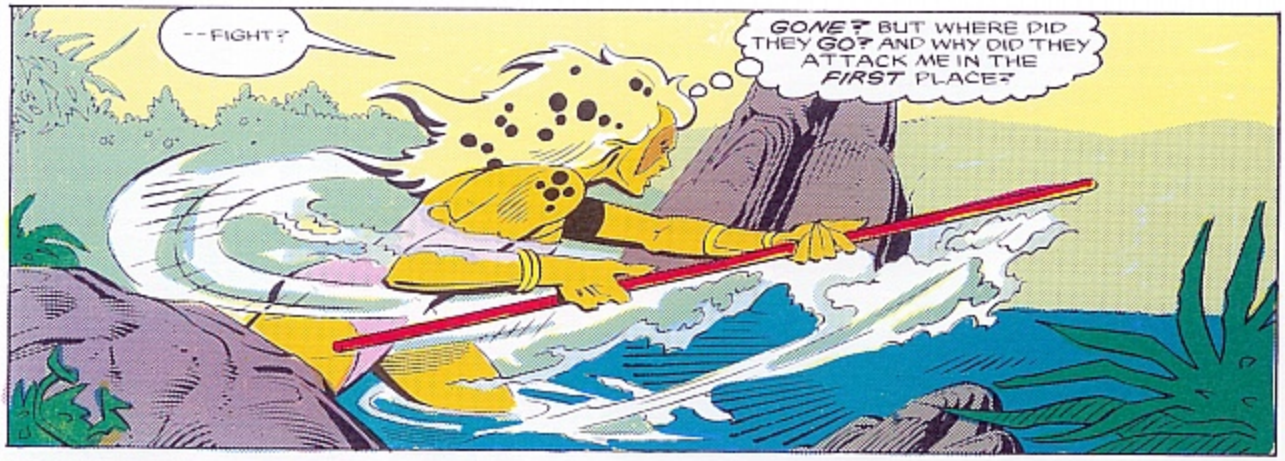




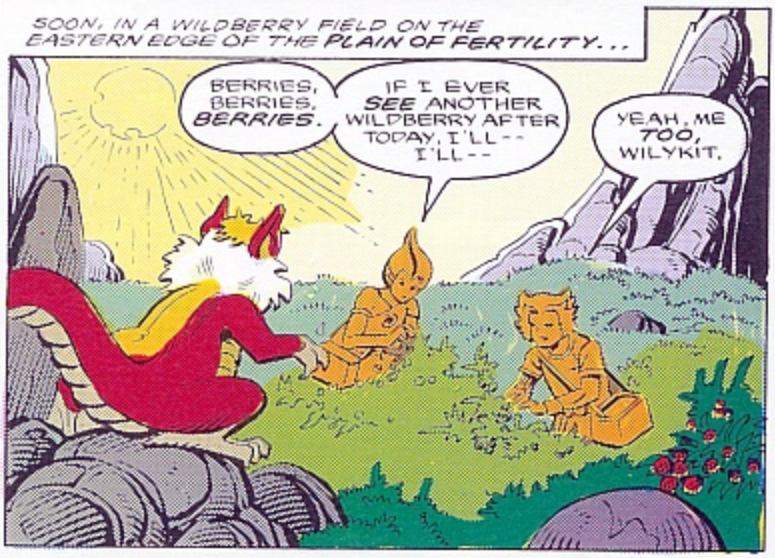
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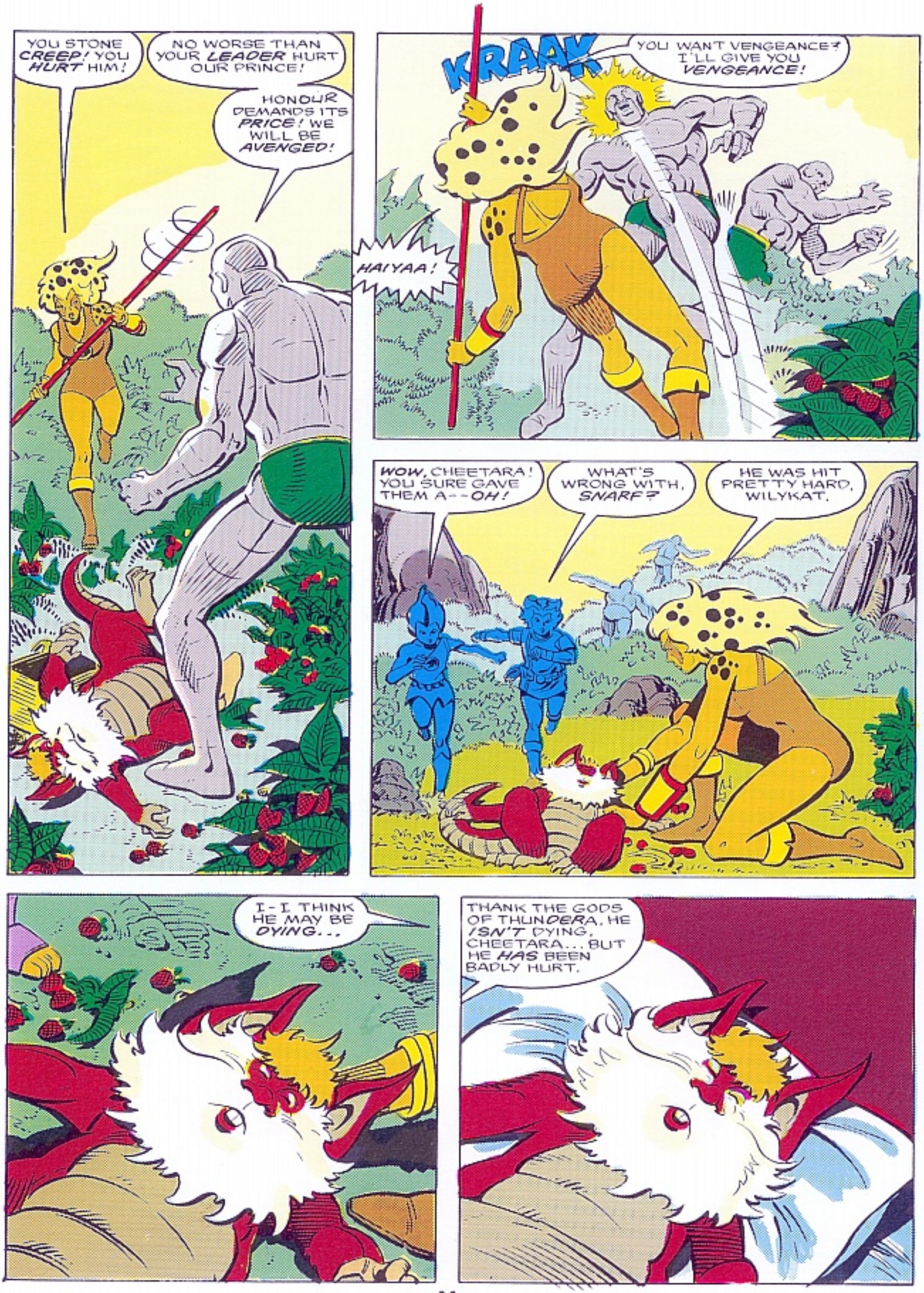




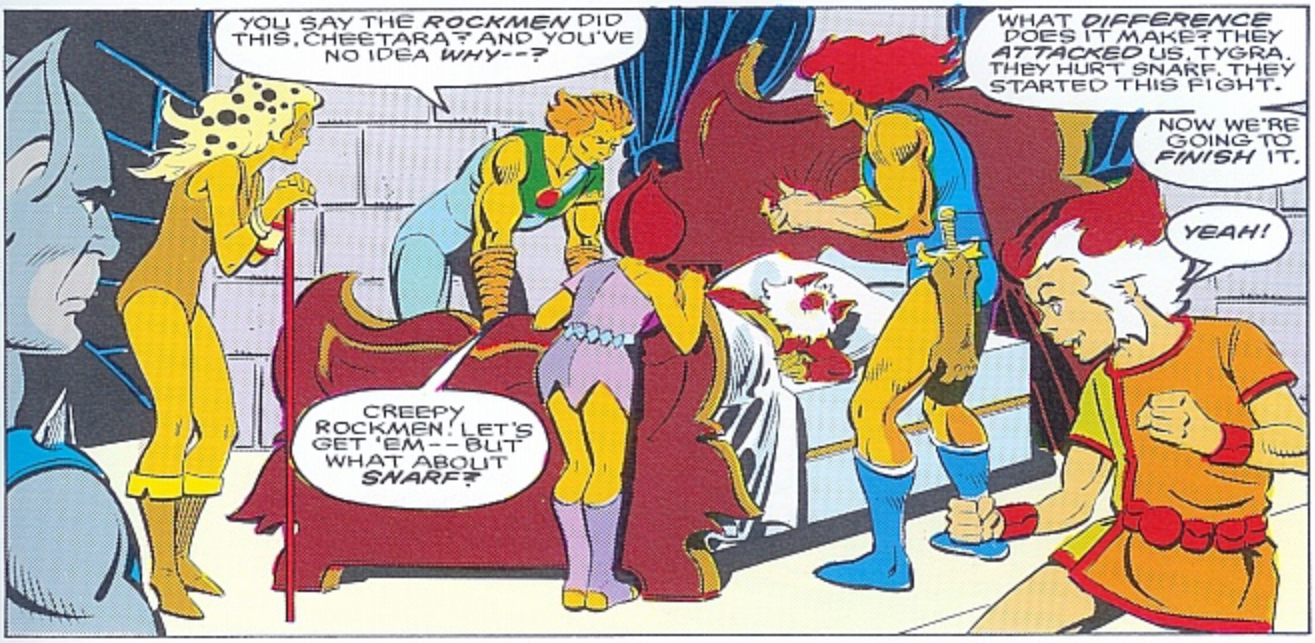
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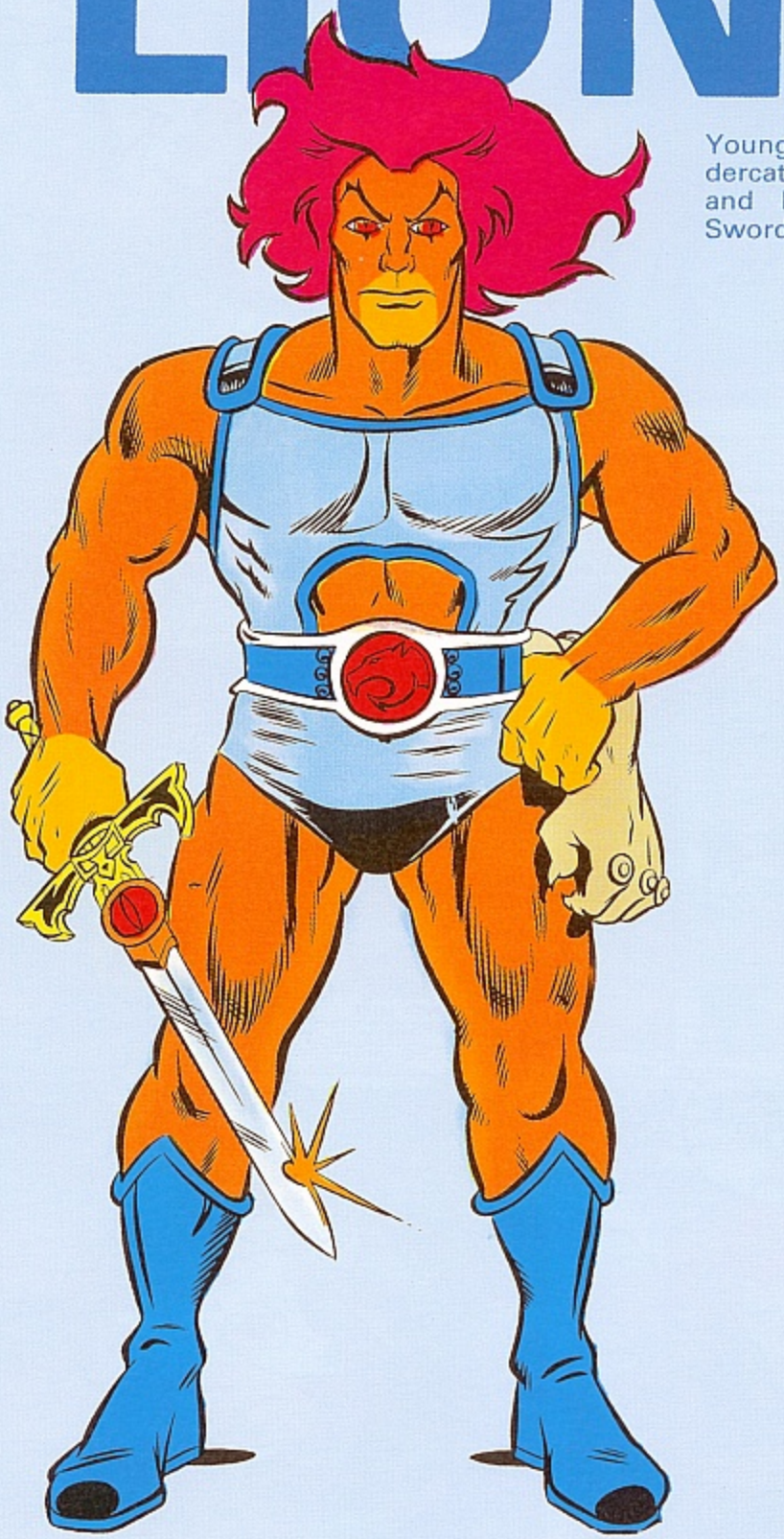




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LION-O



Young Lord of the Mighty Thundercats, champion of the weak and bearer of the fabulous Sword of Omens!

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CHEETARA

Swiftest and fairest of all the Thundercats, Cheetara can outrun everything on Third Earth!



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THE LAST THUNDERCATS STORY

Part One.



Story John Tomlinson Art Cam Smith Colour Nancy Hazel

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Wilykat squinted into the sunlight, a small thrill of fear fluttering at his heart as he banked his spaceboard into a steep climb. He couldn't afford to be dazzled now – not when victory was so close! 'Yayy!' he cried, sneaking a quick backward glance as he soared effortlessly into the cloudless skies above the great stone head of Cats' Lair. Wilykit was only a few metres behind him, a projectile of red and gold as she, too, rose into the air in an effortless arc. 'Last one around Cats' Lair's a shell-brained snail cat!' she yelled, breathless with excitement.

And then it was over, Wilykat whooping with triumph as he circled the proud head of the Lair once, twice, again and again in a victory roll. Wilykit cried out in frustration and rage, circling the Lair in the opposite direction as she tried to push the gloating Thunderkitten off his board. 'Sore loser!' cried Wilykat, laughing wildly. 'Better than being a sore winner!' shrieked Wilykit; and then her face froze in shock. The head of the Lair was swivelling slowly, stone and metal grating and grinding like the roar of a huge cat as it turned to look at them, the vast, jewelled orbs of its eyes glowing a dull red. 'WILYKAT AND WILYKIT!' boomed the unmistakeable voice of Panthro, from hidden speakers. 'GET DOWN FROM THERE. . . *NOW*!'

Wilykat stared at the ground, watching his feet as he kicked up the dust into small piles between his toes, his cheeks burning with shame. Anything was better than meeting Panthro's angry glare as they listened to his lecture. 'In the first place, I've told you over and over that your spaceboards' jet streams interfere with the Lair's scanning equipment,' the big Thundercat scolded, wagging a finger under Wilykat's nose. 'In the second place, you're both supposed to be in school,' he added, placing his hands on his hips. 'It's half-term,' Wilykat lied. Both he and Wilykit had had quite enough of Snarf's lessons, as the little Thundercat chef paraded back and forth in front of his blackboard barking orders and pointing with his stick. 'And in the third place, you shouldn't be playing around here in the first place!' Panthro added, his brows furrowing in puzzlement for a moment as he stared crossly at Thunderkittens. 'Can't you two stay out of my hair?'

'What hair, Panthro?' giggled Wilykit



behind her hand. Wilykat too began to laugh, stifling into silence as Panthro roared with fury. 'Get inside and tidy your rooms!' he snapped. 'I'm not interested in seeing either of you again until dinner-time!' Seizing their chance the two Thunderkittens rushed away, howling with laughter. 'And that *doesn't* mean shove everything under your beds!' Panthro bellowed after them. Wearily, he trudged back into the Lair.

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'Darn kids,' Panthro muttered. 'Back on Thundera, young Thunderkits knew to do as they were told,' he gruffed, slumping wearily into his seat in Cats' Lair's control room. 'Oh really, Panthro?' said Tygra, casting the old Thundercat a sidelong glance from his own console. 'I suppose this isn't the same Panthro who sneaked past the Imperial Guard and cut off Emperor Claudus' whiskers while he slept?'

'He was only Chancellor Claudus then,' said Panthro sheepishly. 'Or the same brilliant young engineer Panthro who hi-jacked the Imperial Flagship of Thundera to race in the annual sky derby?' 'That was different,' said Panthro with injured innocence. 'Our honour was at stake. We *had* to win.'

'Or the Panthro who slipped a whoopee cushion into Jaga's throne?' 'Awriight!' said the big Thundercat loudly, admitting defeat. 'I guess I did get a little boisterous at times. *All* kids do. But that's no excuse for Wilykat and Wilykit to – '

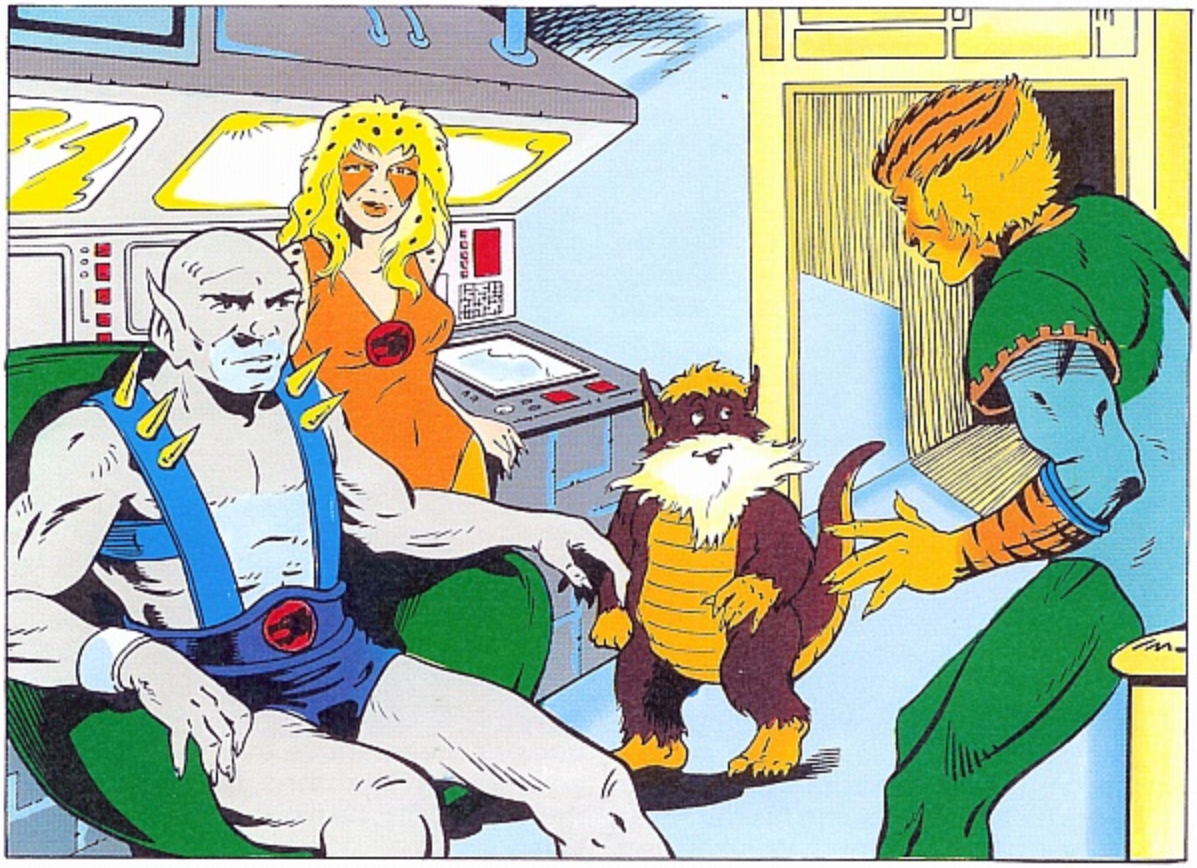
'What I mean to say, old friend, is that the past is never quite as marvellous as you remember it,' said Tygra evenly, 'and the present isn't as bad as you think. Kits will be kits. . .'

'Sometimes I miss Thundera too, Panthro,' said Cheetara, suddenly standing behind his chair. Panthro jumped. He never quite got used to the speed with which the female Thundercat moved from place to place. 'It seems so long ago and far away now,' Cheetara was saying. 'I often wonder what our lives would have been like, had we stayed.'

'Warm! Snarf! Snarf!' said Snarf, scampering into the control room. 'Don't forget, Thundera burned up when the sun shifted on its axis. We were lucky to escape and *very* lucky to happen by Third Earth along the way!'

'I'm not denyin' that, Snarf,' said Panthro crossly. 'But a Cat gets home-sick once in a while, and anyway –'

'Moons of Thundera!' interrupted Tygra, his mouth open in shock. In front of him on the console, a light was



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flashing; a light that none of the Thundercats had ever thought would see use. 'Distress signal,' said Tygra, his voice a dry whisper. 'From a Thunderian Ark Ship!'

'A likely story,' said Panthro, unbelieving, his fingers flickering over the controls. 'Only two ships made it to Third Earth – ours, and *The Vanguard of Ro-Bear*, with Bengali, Pumyra and Lynx-O. It's like I said – Kat and Kit have messed up the scanners with their spaceboards! Darn kids. . .'

'I don't think so, Panthro,' said a commanding voice from the doorway. The Thundercats spun around as the tall, crimson-maned figure of Lion-O, Lord of the Thundercats, strode into the room. 'I've been tracking the same signal all morning in the Thundertank. It's real – and it's coming from Hook Mountain.'

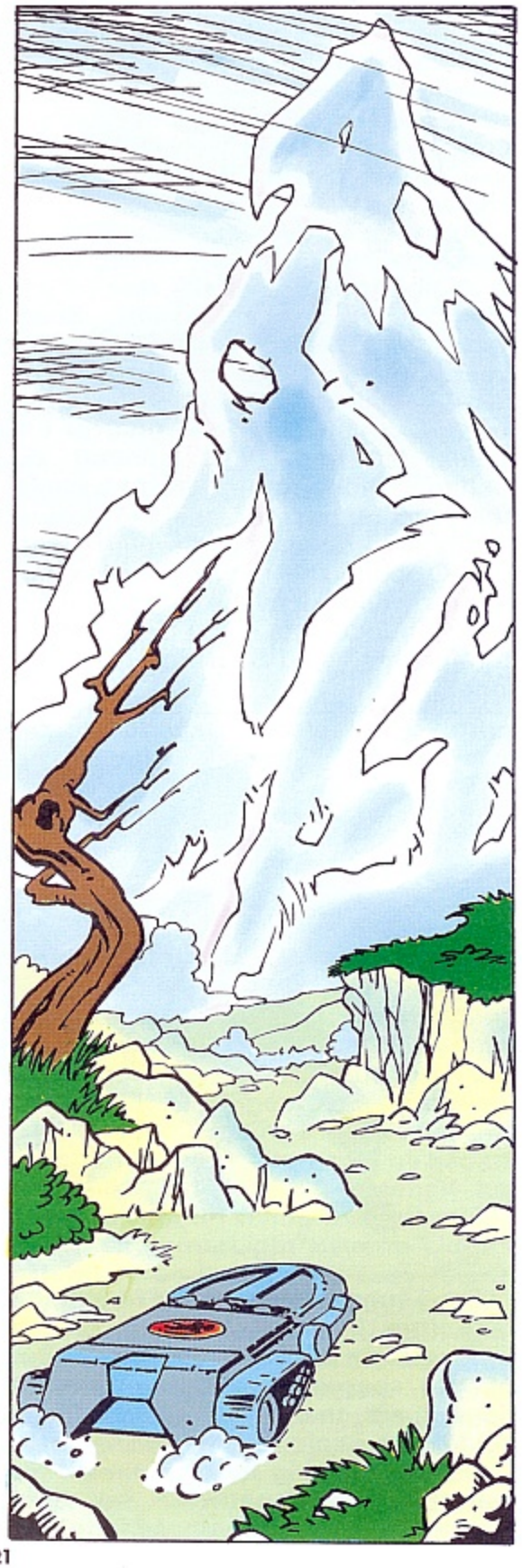
Cheetara ran a hand through her hair, a puzzled line forming between her eyebrows. 'It's not possible, Lion-O,' she said. 'We've lived on Third Earth for over three years now. We'd *know* if there had been other survivors.'

'Not necessarily, Cheetara,' said Tygra thoughtfully. 'It's possible that other ships escaped Thundera – maybe damaging their engines as she exploded. It might have taken them until now to reach Third Earth. . .'

'It's time to prepare yourselves for an exciting encounter, Thundercats,' said Lion-O, beaming widely as the others gathered around. 'It's time to bid a new group of Thundercats welcome – to Third Earth!'



Hook Mountain loomed ahead of the Thundertank like a silent, white-robed sentinel, the icy overhang of her summit a snow-giant's frown in the swirling snow. Huddling deep into their cold-weather gear the Thundercats watched with an excitement greater than words as the tank's optoscanner bleeped, their breath curling on the air in wisps of white. Manoeuvring the



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Thundertank to a halt at the foot of the mountain, Panthro turned to Lion-O as the engines died. 'This is as far as she goes,' he said. 'Can't risk her on the slopes – she'd just as likely slide all the way down again.' Lion-O nodded grimly.

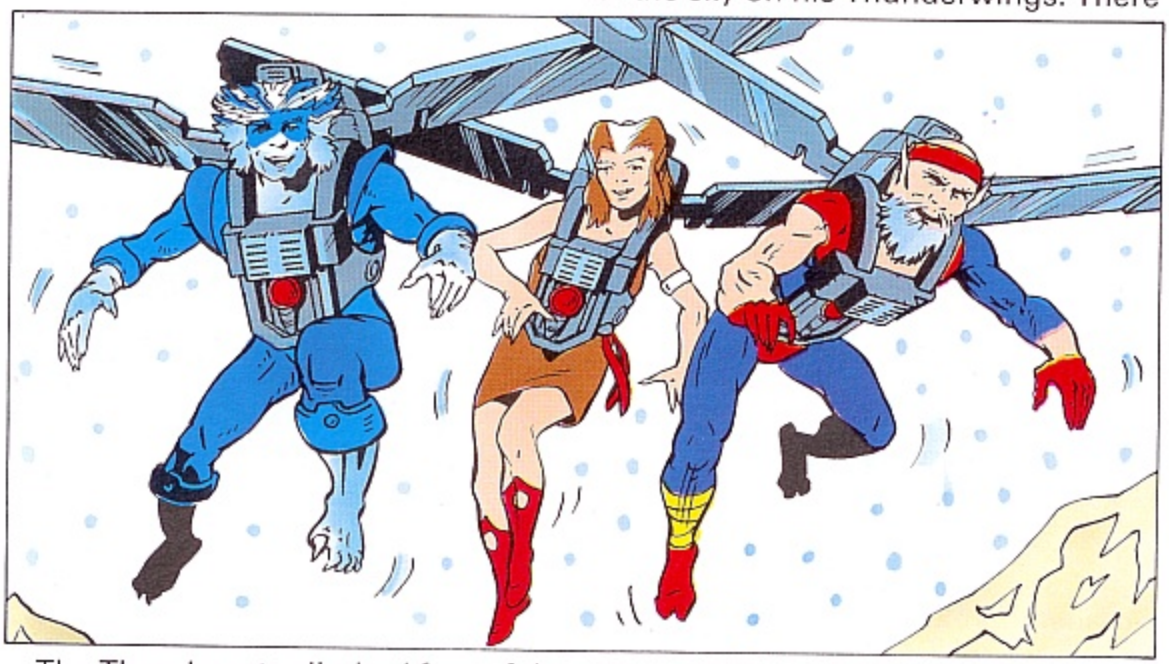
'All out, Thundercats,' he said. 'From here on, we travel on foot.' There was a strangled groan from the rear of the tank, and an anguished Snarf appeared, sniffing dolefully at the freezing air. 'Have a heart, your cubship,' he whimpered, turning around to show the one area of his small, fat body not covered by clothing. 'Nobody thought to include cold weather gear for tails! I'm getting frostbite all down my left-hand side!' Lion-O opened his mouth to speak, but was drowned out by the laughter of the other Thundercats. 'Don't all rush to comfort me,' said Snarf in an injured tone.

it would cause a pretty serious avalanche. They could be buried under tons of snow. . .'

'Maybe not, Cheetara,' said Tygra breathlessly. 'Look!'

Above them in the snow-flecked heavens, three winged creatures were circling the Thundertank. Vision was restricted by the snow, but even through the hail of white the Thundercats could plainly see that the wings were not those of living creatures at all. 'Thunderwings!' said Panthro, with a gasp. 'Those are Thundercats up there!' Soundlessly, the circling visitors began to glide in lower. Instinctively the Thundercats moved into a tight group, back to back. 'Remember, Cats, they're our friends,' said Lion-O nervously. 'There's nothing to fear. . ."

'I should hope not, Lion-O,' said a familiar voice, as Bengali swooped out of the sky on his Thunderwings. There



The Thundercats climbed free of the tank, the insistent beeping of the optoscanner ringing in their ears. But of the spaceship, with or without passengers, there was no sign. 'They could be injured, Lion-O,' said Cheetara, blowing into her hands for warmth. 'If a Thunderian Ark Ship crashed headlong into Hook Mountain,

was a chorus of relieved sighs as the blind Thundercat, Lynx-O, and the girl cat Pumyra glided into a smooth landing behind Tygra's younger brother. 'We came as soon as we could, Lord Lion-O,' said Lynx-O. 'But the Tower of Omens is a long way from Hook Mountain – even on Thunderwings!'

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'I'm glad you're here, Cats,' said Lion-O gratefully. 'Because we may just need all the help we can get. . .'

'Lion-O'.

Lion-O spun around instantly, though the voice that had called his name was barely a spectral whisper above the keening wind. None of the other Thundercats had moved; because none but Lion-O could see or hear the new arrival. 'Jaga!'

'It is indeed I, Lion-O,' said the spirit form as he hovered on the chill, bright air, a sad smile on his ghostly lips. 'What brings you here, Jaga?' asked Lion-O, puzzled. The former Lord of the Thundercats would usually appear to him in moments of the greatest danger. 'I am your spiritual guide, Lion-O,' said Jaga gravely, 'and I bring a warning.' The spectral Thundercat's brow clouded with forboding as he spoke. 'Dark forces are at work in these parts, Lion-O,' he said. 'You serve the design of one greater than I – greater, perhaps, than all of the Thundercats.'

'But who, Jaga? Are we in danger?'

'Only from yourselves, young Lord,' said the old Thundercat, his ghostly form already dying on the wind. 'Open your eyes to the here and now – do not be slaves to past mistakes or future fears. Only then will you find peace. . .'

'Jaga!' cried Lion-O, but the spirit had flown and, in its place, was a rising whirlpool of snow.

'What's happening?' gasped Lynx-O, as the winds began to howl.

'Snaarrf!' came a plaintive cry from somewhere in the rising snow-storm. Icy needles of frost blasted the Thundercats' flesh, driving them to their knees. 'Hurricane!' bellowed Panthro above the gale. 'Back to the Thundertank!'

The Thundertank was nowhere to be seen. All the Cats were now engulfed in a rising tide of snow, each blundering about in confusion as Hook Mountain disappeared in a raging, howling gale of white. Lion-O's numbing fingers fumbled for the Sword of Omens as he thrashed helplessly, the icy air whipping and flurrying around him. Slowly, painstakingly, he drew the great golden blade out of his claw-shield, his fingers almost freezing to the metal. Climbing to his feet as the wind continued its siren wail, he began to speak. 'S-Sword of Omens!' he coughed, mouth filling instantly with snow. 'Give me Light Beyond Light!' Instantly, a beam of ruby light streamed from the hilt of the sword, blazing a glowing trail through the snow. For a few moments the whole of Hook Mountain was ablaze in the mystical glow of the Eye of Thundera. The Thundercats' vision cleared, snow hissing into rain as it drifted into the path of the beam and warmth flooded back into their limbs.

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As the light of the sword died, the Thundercats were rewarded with their first clear and unobstructed view of Hook Mountain. Directly ahead of them, her prow looming gaunt and menacing from its canopy of snow, was the wreck of a Thunderian Ark Ship.

The frost-rimed exit hatch of the wreck reared darkly ahead as the Thundercats approached the ship. When they walked, it was quietly and stealthily; when they spoke, it was in hushed whispers. Something about the ship, so familiar to their Thunderian eyes, yet so alien to Third Earth, lent the silent hulk an air of wonder and mystery. Tygra was first to reach the door, probing the chill metal with slow deliberation. 'Sealed,' he said at last. 'Whenever they crashed, they didn't get around to blowing the hatch.'

'Damage doesn't look too bad, either,' said Panthro, his eyes travelling over the great metal flanks of the Ark Ship. 'Maybe she didn't crash after all. . .'

'But if she didn't, and if the main hatch is still in one piece –' began Bengali. Lion-O drew himself up to his full height, his grip tightening on the Sword of Omens. 'Then whoever flew her is still inside,' he said.

The snow had died to a gentle flurry as the Thundercats stood in a group on the slopes of Hook Mountain. At the head of the group stood Lion-O, an expression of confusion on his face as he reasoned with the quarrelling Cats. 'I don't understand, Lion-O,' said Cheetara, exasperated. 'There are Thundercats in that ship!' 'They may be injured, young Lord,' said Lynx-O patiently. 'Dying, perhaps. Why do you hesitate?' Lion-O felt Panthro's hand on his shoulder. 'What was Jaga's warning?' the old Thundercat asked quietly. 'Nothing clear,' said Lion-O wearily. 'Something about the past. . .'

He didn't finish the sentence. Noiselessly and without warning, the exit hatch of the Ark Ship slid open. What could be seen of the interior was dark, but a dim glow spilled from somewhere within, a faint mechanical hum reaching their ears. Tygra started forward, but Lion-O placed a restraining hand on his arm. 'No, Tygra,' he said. 'If there is danger here, the Lord of the Thundercats should be first to confront it.' Tygra fell back with a sour smile. Didn't Lion-O *ever* get



tired of playing leader?

Slowly, deliberately, his heart fluttering like a caged bird, the Thundercat lord stepped into the hatch. . .

Until it escaped him in a relieved sigh, Lion-O was unaware that he had been holding his breath. The air on the bridge of the Ark Ship was stale and metallic, but still held a faint whisper of home. Lion-O took in great lungfuls of it, remembering feather meadows, singing rains, and the rolling green hills of Thundera. The ship was empty. Circuits chattered; relays hummed. The flight deck throbbed with

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electronic life, but there were no passengers. Behind him, unbidden, the rest of the Thundercats crowded onto the bridge. 'Mother of Jaga,' breathed Panthro, his eyes aglow. 'Doesn't this just take you back?'

'She's a beauty,' said Tygra, scanning the gleaming control panels as he traced a finger across the crisp leather of the seats. 'Some wreck! She looks fresh out of the hangars. . .'

'But where are the crew?' Lynx-O interjected.

Lion-O threw his hands up in puzzlement. 'Check the log,' he began, but Panthro had already seated himself at the helm. With the skill of the veteran starship pilot that he was, the big Thundercat brought the command console to glimmering life. In the gloom of the flight deck the rest of the Cats gathered around, their faces bathed in eerie, flickering light as a face began to form on the main screen.

'We are Cat-kind,' said a voice, old and travel-weary. The face on the screen was that of a Thunderian noblecat of the *Polska Felidae* line. 'I am Angora of old Thundera, Commander of the Ark Ship *Sargasso*.' Lynx-O murmured something, his voice suspicious. 'I don't remember any noblecat named Angora,' he said. 'Sshhh!' chorused Bengali and Pumyra.

The image on the screen fluttered like a candle flame as the old noblecat continued his story. 'Thundera is dying,' Angora said sadly. 'Those of us who remain must make our escape as best we can, and to that end. . .' the camera closed in on his grim features '. . .I have authorised use of the experimental Time Warp device.'

'Time Warp?' Bengali gasped 'That's just a myth!'

'Sshhh!' chorused Lynx-O and Pumyra.

'My crew and I will attempt, for the first time, to break the time barrier,' Angora was saying. 'We will escape the destruction of Thundera – by retreating into her past!' Panthro reeled back in alarm as the control panel erupted in geyser of sparks. The screen was silent. 'Guess there was damage, after all, Lion-O,' he said. 'From here on in, the flight recorder's just so much scrap metal.'

'It doesn't matter,' said the Thundercat leader, an expression of dawning wonder on his face. 'We have our answer. The *Sargasso* is a time machine!'

'We already know that time travel is possible,' said Cheetara, remembering

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their past adventures in Third Earth's Cave of the Vortex. 'But what happened to Angora and his crew? How did the *Sargasso* wind up on Third Earth in the present day?'

'What about the rest of the ship,' Panthro?' asked Lion-O, his mind racing. 'Way ahead of you, young lord,' said Panthro, his fingers flickering over the instrument panel. 'Far as I can tell, she's fuelled and ready to roll,' he said. 'If there's no structural damage, we could lift off right now!'

'Where to, Panthro?' said Snarf, scampering nervously around the flight deck. 'Space travel gives me goosebumps – and anyway, there's not a whole lot left of Thundera to go back to!'

'No,' said Lion-O, beginning to smile. 'Not *now*. . .'



As the lighting on the flight deck dimmed to red and the *Sargasso*'s engines powered to escape velocity, Lion-O allowed his thoughts to drift. It had been long, long ago that he had last flown in a Thunderian Ark Ship, but the scene around him was so familiar, it felt as though he had never been away. Framed in the viewing ports were the icy wastes of Hook Mountain, but it was easy to slip away into another time, to a trembling planet on the eve of a fiery destruction. Panthro had sat on the helm, as he did now. Around him were Tygra, Cheetara, the Wilykittens, Snarf – and Jaga. Lion-O looked down at his large, powerful hands. They had been the hands of a child then, white-knuckled with emotion as he had stood at the viewing ports of the Royal Flagship of Thundera and watched his home-planet burn. Long, long ago. . .

'Are you sure we're doing the right thing, Panthro?' whispered Cheetara, as the big Thundercat prepared the *Sargasso* for countdown. 'Our new home – our friends – the new life we've made on Third Earth. Is it right to leave them all, without even a backward glance?'

'You said it yourself, Cheetara,' Panthro smiled. 'You miss Thundera. We *all* do. Wherever we make our home, we'll always be Thundercats.'

'We were lucky to find Third Earth,' said Tygra with a sad smile. 'But sometimes it was just a little *too* lively for my liking! With the grace of Jaga, this will be our last adventure for quite a while. . .'

'Borrr-ing!' chorused Wilykat and Wilykit, falling silent at Tygra's angry glare.

Lion-O remained silent. 'Past mistakes,' Jaga had said. Here was a chance to *correct* past mistakes, he thought! If it were really possible to travel back in time before the destruction of Thundera, then it was their duty to do so. They could warn past generations of Thunderians about the coming disaster! When it eventually struck, perhaps all of them might be saved!

'Fasten those seatbelts, Cats,' shouted Panthro above the din of the engines. 'Anyone wants to check in their tickets and walk home, now's the time.' Lion-O's eyes travelled around the cabin, lingering on the faces of his fellow Thundercats. Lynx-O, silent but resolute. Bengali and Pumyra, eyes alight with the excitement of youth. Tygra and Cheetara, sad but

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determined. Wilykat and Wilykit, to whom all life was an adventure, and Snarf, one of the oldest of them all, who had spent most of his life on Thundera. Panthro's face was expressionless, but Lion-O knew that the Thundercat's excitement was as great as his own. Lion-O smiled; nowhere had he seen the slightest sign of doubt or regret. 'Engage engines, Panthro,' he said. 'And for the last time on Third Earth – Thundercats – HO!'

In a billowing cloud of flame the Thunderian Ark Ship lifted into the skies of Third Earth. In less than a second she was gone, like a cloud upon the chill air. The wind howled emptily around the icy overhang of Hook Mountain, as though none had ever lived there, nor ever could.

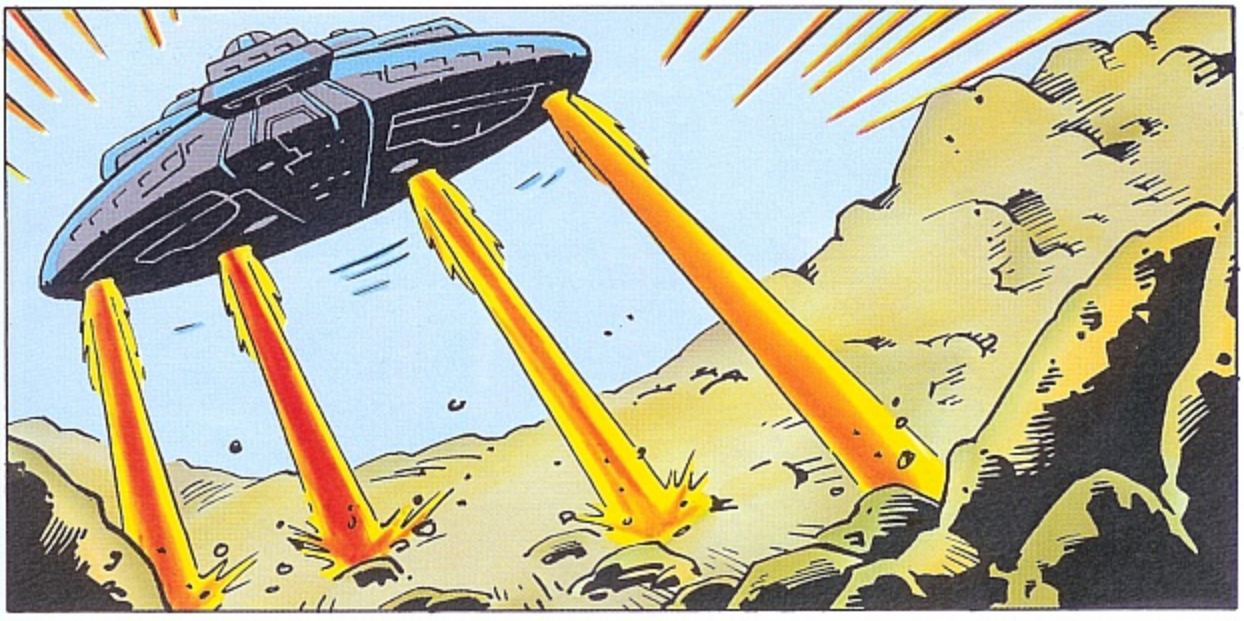
Lion-O was dimly aware of Panthro shouting 'Destination Thundera!' before passing out, as the intense gravitational pull of their lift-off slammed him into his seat. When he regained consciousness he blinked his eyes several times, unbelieving. The deck, the bulkheads, every interior surface of the *Sargasso* was glowing! Around him the other Thundercats slept, motionless, as the Ark Ship plunged on. Lion-O looked up, and caught his breath. Stars! It was as though the roof of the *Sargasso* had been peeled back. He watched in wonderment as the Universe rushed by, stars rising and falling like rockets in the night sky, exploding into life and dying in seconds, was this how it felt to travel in time? A shape passed the ship in a flicker of movement, and Lion-O blinked again. Had it not been so large, the shape could almost have been the figure of a man – a man made of stars and darkness, gliding above the *Sargasso* as she flew. Still wondering, he slipped again into sleep.

'Lion-O! *Lion-O*! Can you hear me?' The Thundercat leader jolted sharply awake, heart pounding. 'Just like his cubship to oversleep,' scolded Snarf, tapping his foot. 'I suppose you were expecting breakfast in bed? Snarf! Snarf!'

'W-where are we?' Lion-O gasped, sitting bolt upright. 'Is the journey over? Are we home?'

'Oh, we're home sure enough,' said Panthro, his brow creased with worry. 'But you're not gonna like it.' He thumbed a button as a large screen flickered into life. On it was the image of a planet, the unmistakeable blue-green, shining orb of Third Earth.

'We're outta fuel, too,' Panthro said gravely. 'We may have gone nowhere, but we sure guzzled plenty of



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Thundrillium gettin' there!' Tygra emerged from a maintenance hatch, his face streaked with dirt. 'Nothing I can find explains the malfunction, Lion-O,' he said. 'We programmed her correctly – by all rights, that should be Thundera down there!'

'Well, we're gonna get a closer look real soon,' said Panthro grimly. 'Back to your seats – 'cause we've just enough fuel for re-entry!'

The cloudless summer skies of Third Earth were shattered in a hurricane of sound as the *Sargasso* blazed into stationary orbit above the Plain of Fertility. With a roar that sent birds and animals diving and scurrying for cover the great ship swooped in to land, her retro jets gouging deep tracks in the rich earth. Still smoking, her hull a deep, fiery red, she settled into stillness.

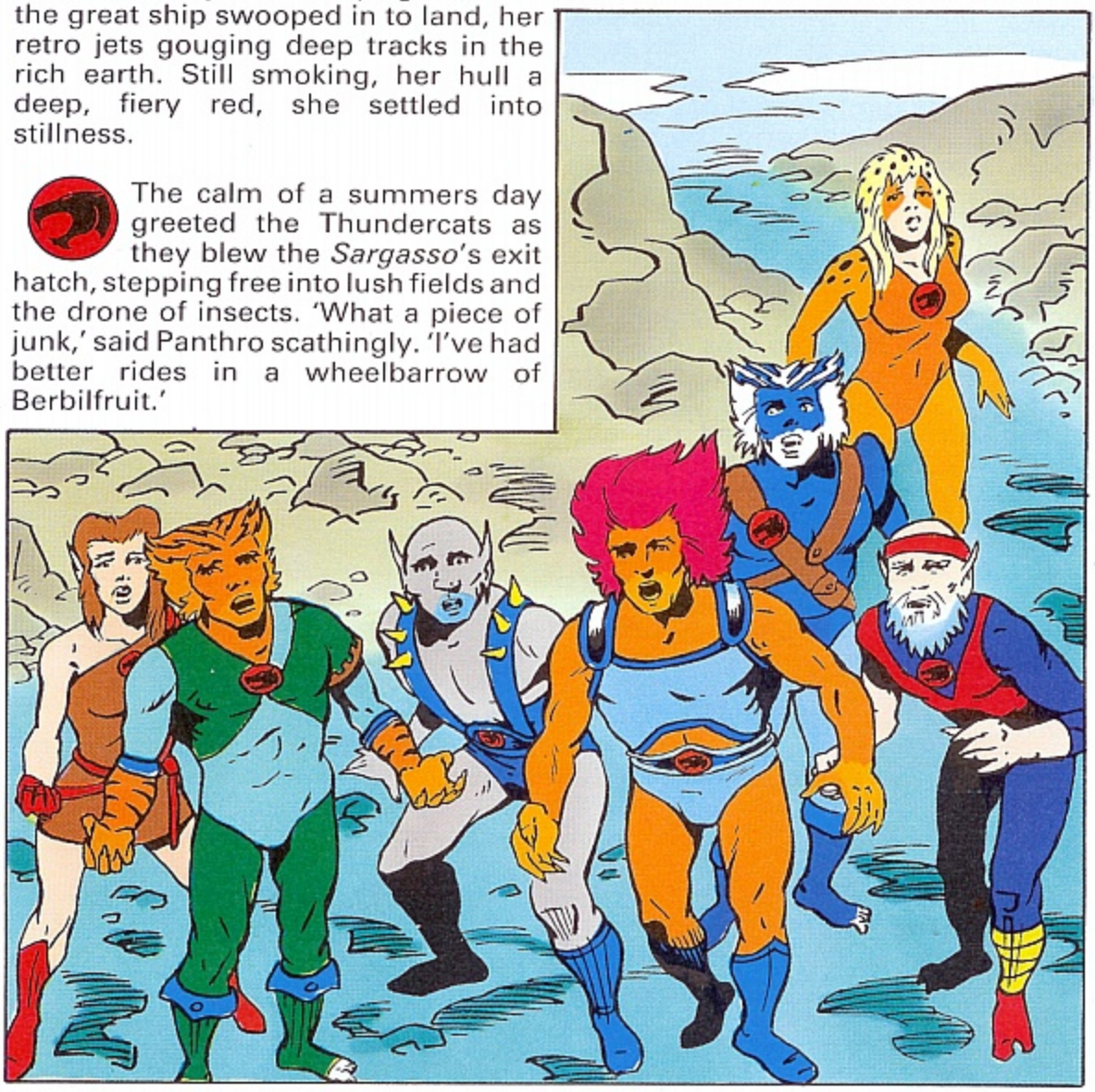
The calm of a summers day greeted the Thundercats as they blew the *Sargasso*'s exit hatch, stepping free into lush fields and the drone of insects. 'What a piece of junk,' said Panthro scathingly. 'I've had better rides in a wheelbarrow of Berbilfruit.'

'Look on the bright side, old friend,' said Tygra. 'She's still in serviceable condition. Once we get her back to the Lair –'

Both stopped dead in their tracks. One by one, the Thundercat passengers emerged from the *Sargasso*; and one by one, all froze in horror. Ahead of them, where Cats' Lair had stood since their arrival on Third Earth, the lone, level and quite empty Plains of Fertility stretched far away. 'She's gone,' said Panthro simply.

'Cats' Lair is gone. . .'

TO BE CONTINUED



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PUMYRA



Fast as a leopard, Pumyra was one of the three new Thundercats to arrive on Third Earth in the Berbil Starship!

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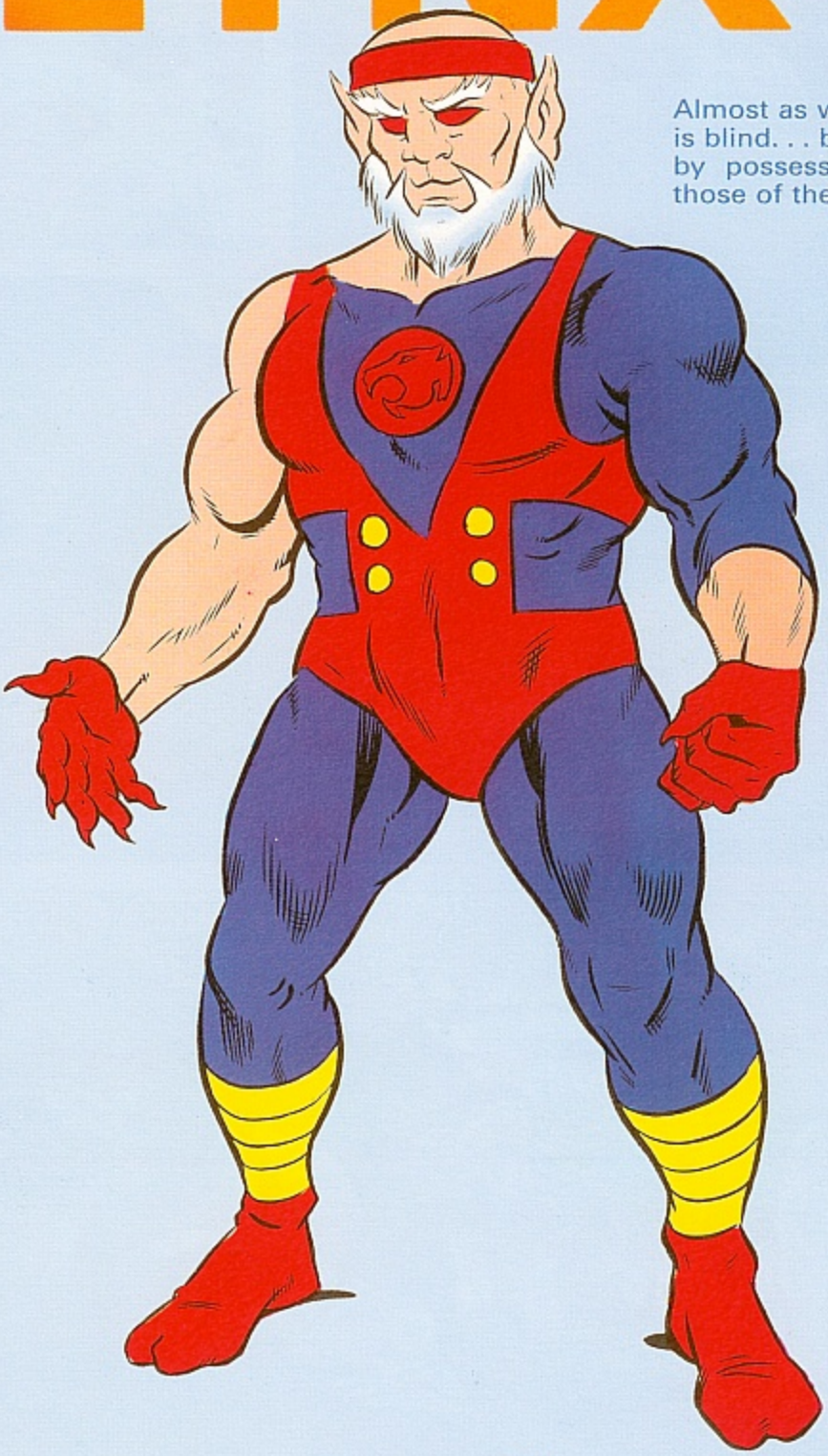
BENGALI

Reckless and brave, Bengali is the second of the new Thundercats, and brother to Tygra!



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LYNX-O

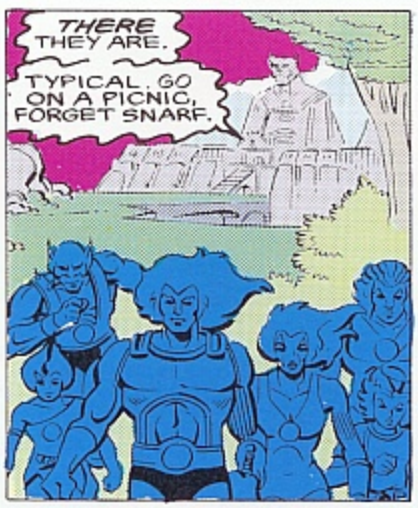


Almost as wise as Jaga, Lynx-O is blind. . . but makes up for this by possessing senses beyond those of the other Thundercats!

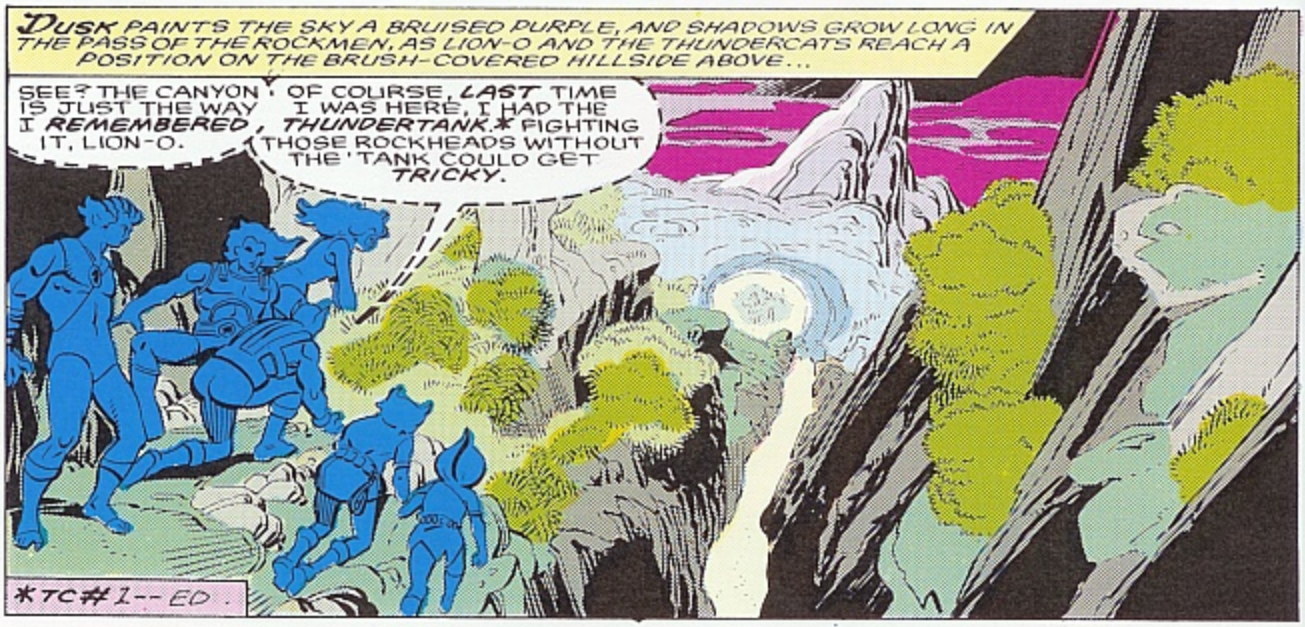
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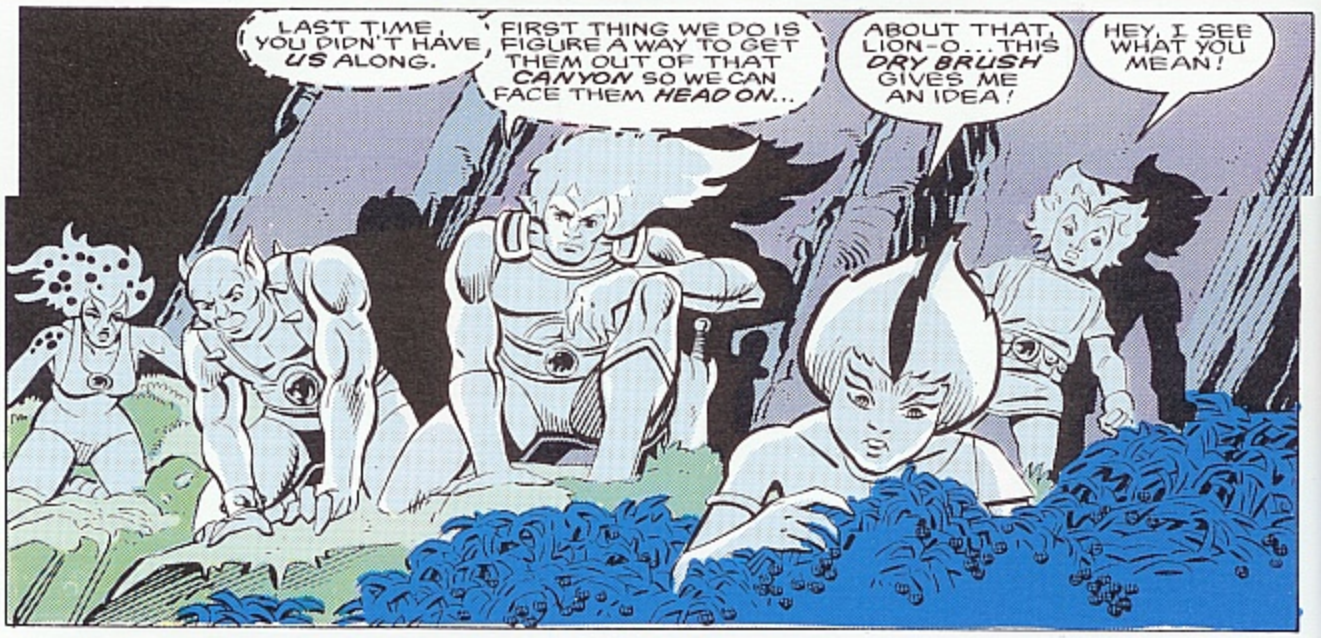
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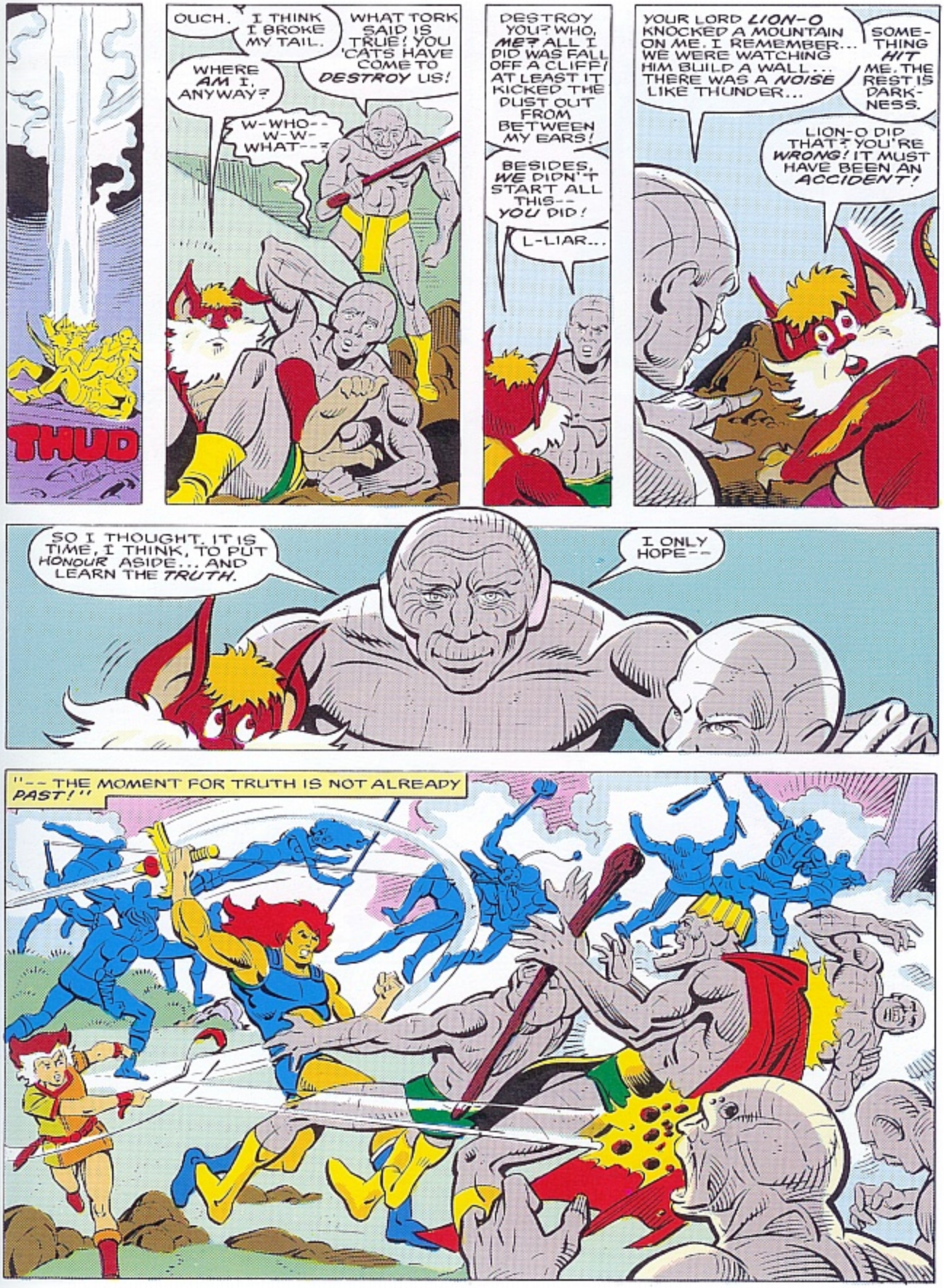








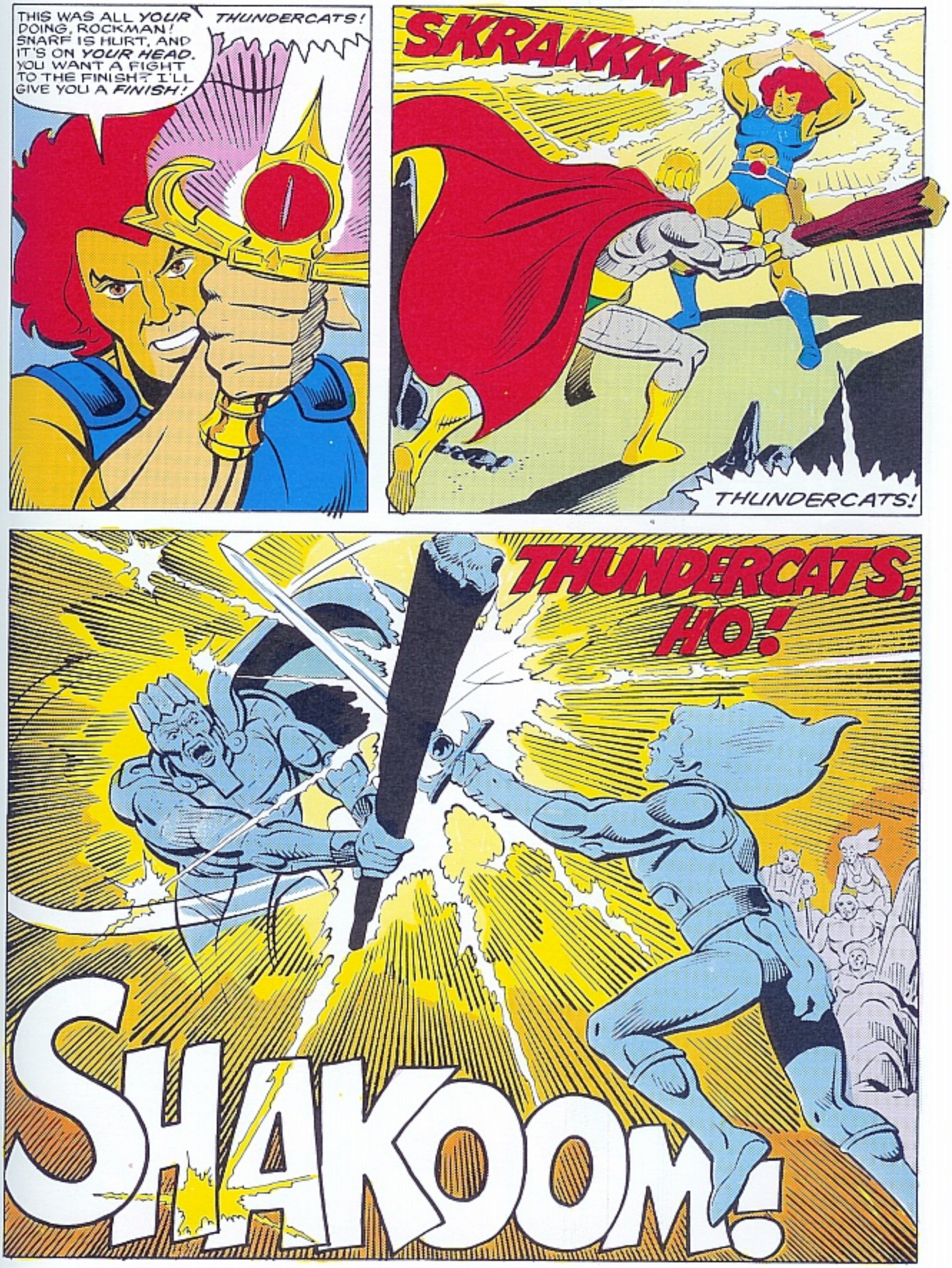
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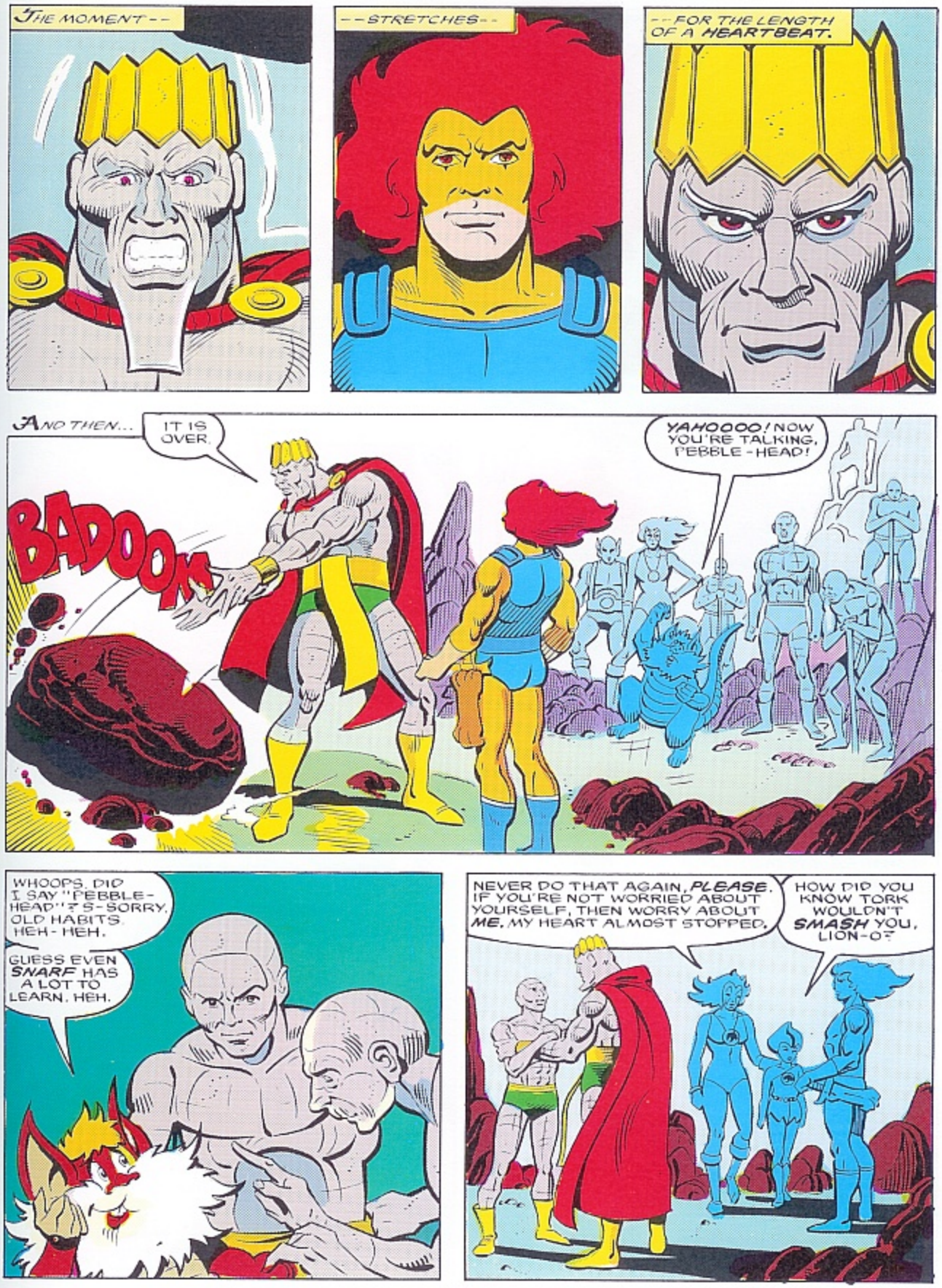
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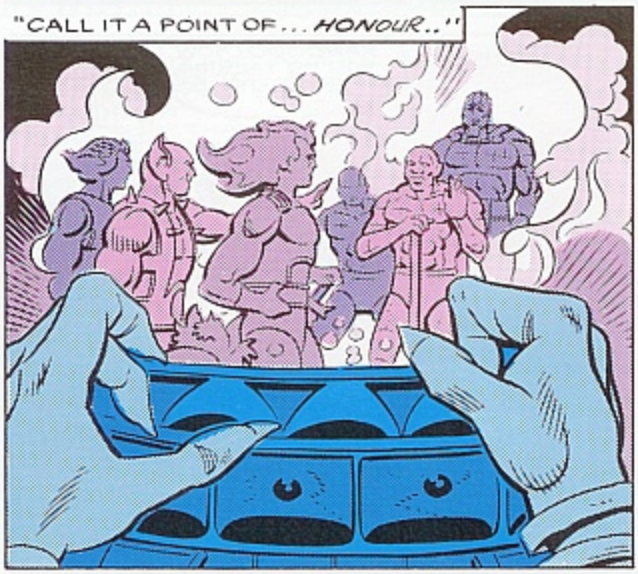
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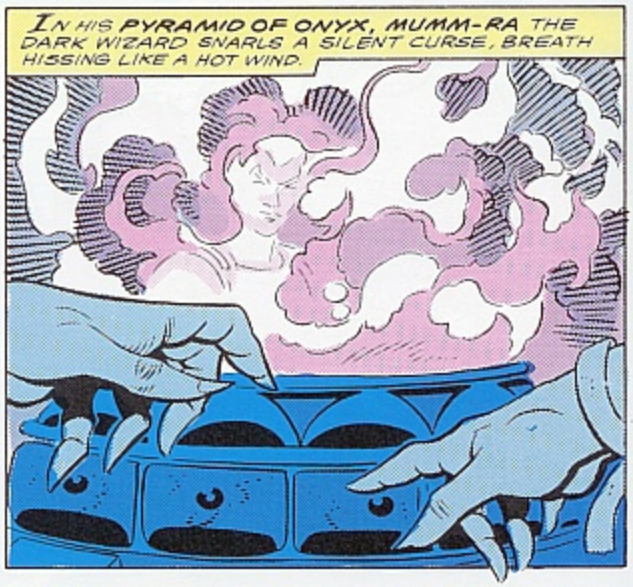


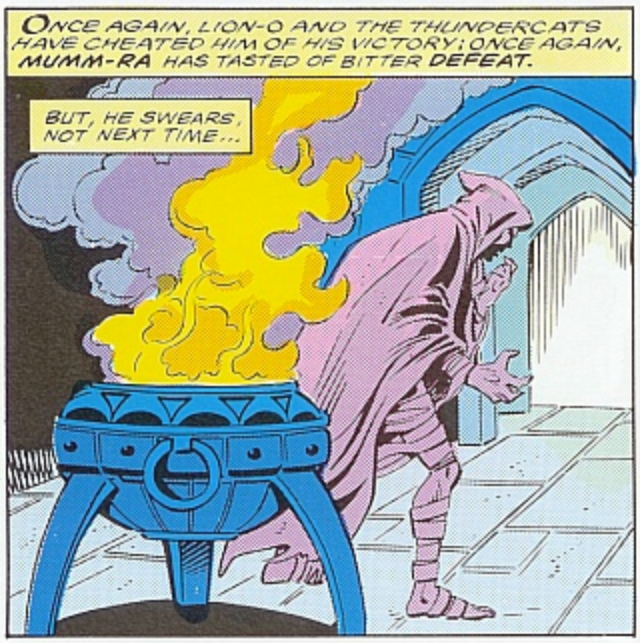
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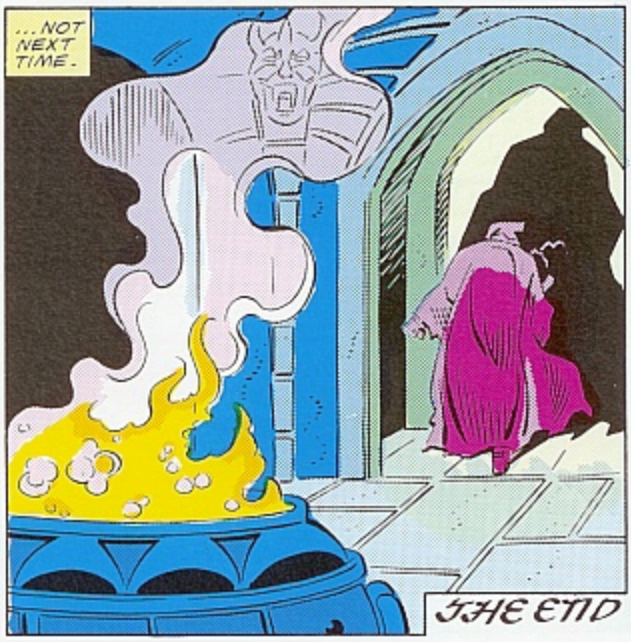












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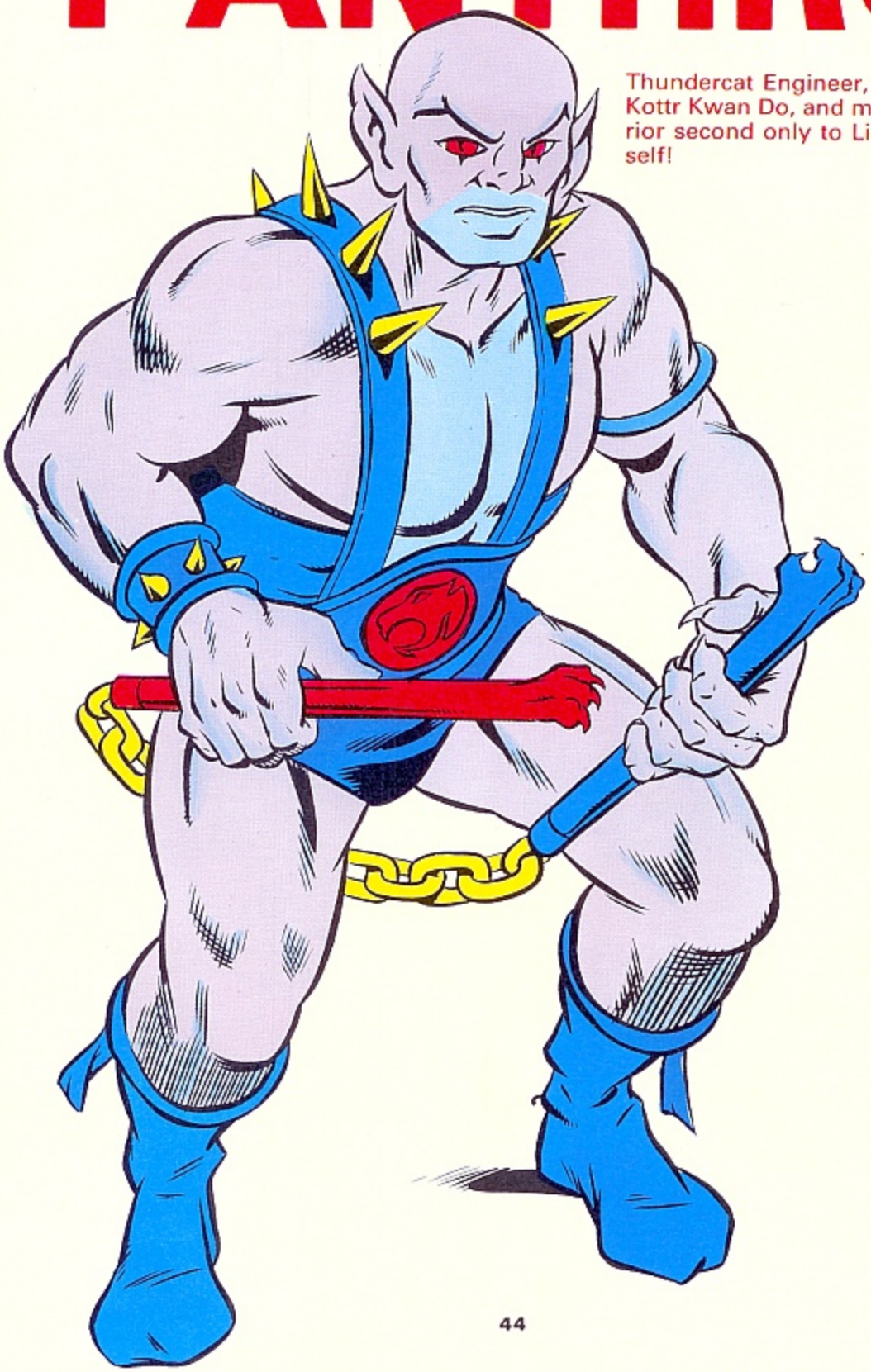
WILYKIT and WILYKAT

The Thunderkittens. . . brave and bold, young and foolish, masters of the spaceboard and eternally young at heart!



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PANTHRO

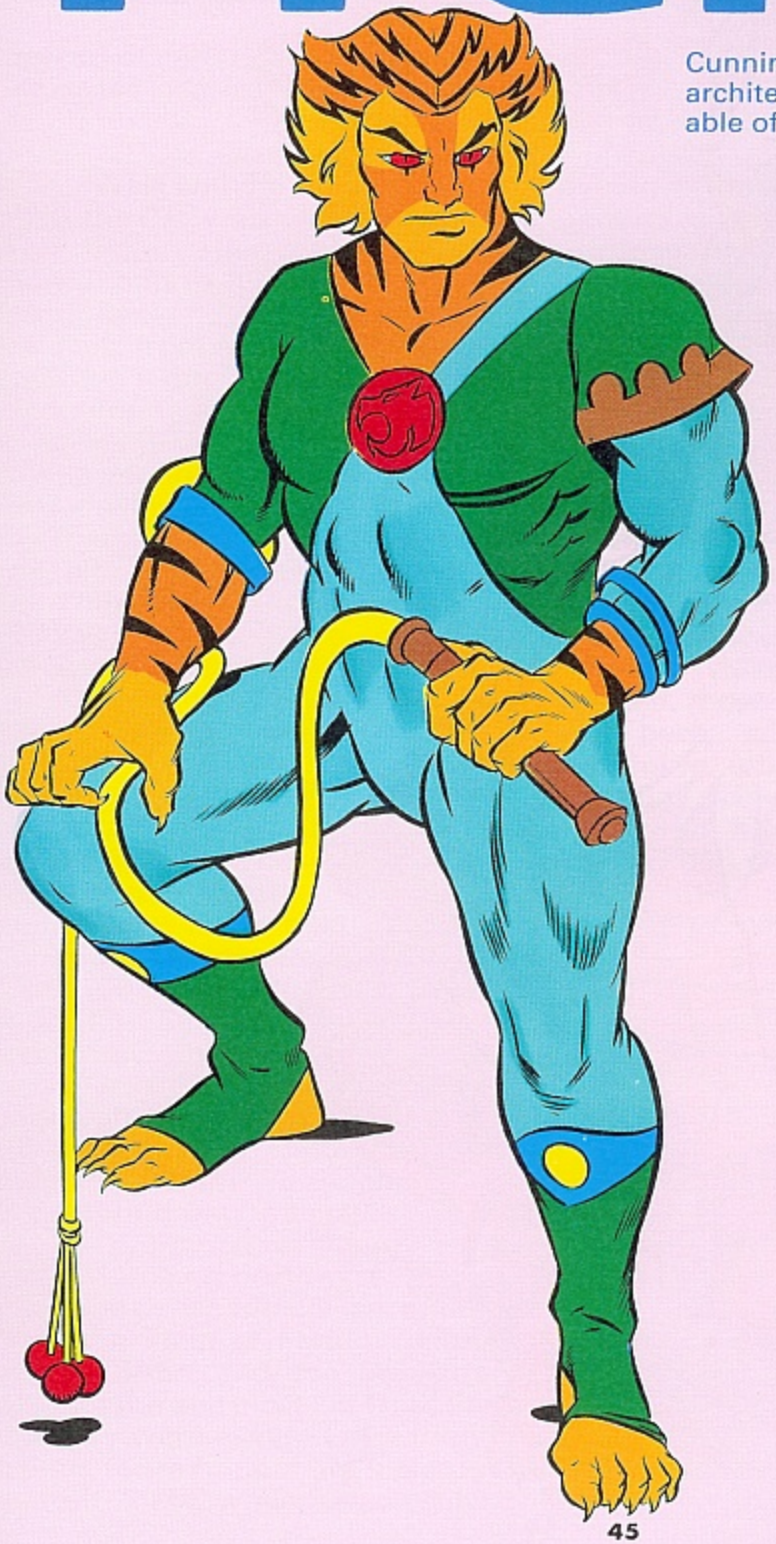


Thundercat Engineer, master of Kottr Kwan Do, and mighty warrior second only to Lion-O himself!

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TYGRA

Cunning and wise, Tygra is the architect of Cats' Lair and is capable of turning himself invisible!



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SNARF

Battle hardened Thundercat warrior and Cats' Lair chef par excellence!



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THE LAST THUNDERCATS STORY

Part Two.

'Walk with hope in the time of the Cat, walk with dread in the time after that,' Lion-O muttered, half to himself. 'Huh?' said Panthro.

'It's a line from a poem I learned as a Thunderkit,' the Thundercat leader replied. 'Funny I should remember it, after so many years ...'

'Not so very funny, young lord,' said Lynx-O, falling in beside him as they trudged across the empty plain to the former site of Cats' Lair. 'In our desire to see Thundera again, we all ignored our better judgement. We are lucky to be alive.'

The Thundercats stopped. Of Cats' Lair there was no sign – only a field of lush grass, curving up a steep embankment and rustling in the breeze. 'For a moment I feared that the Mutants might have destroyed it in our absence,' said Tygra. 'But it's as though it were never built!'

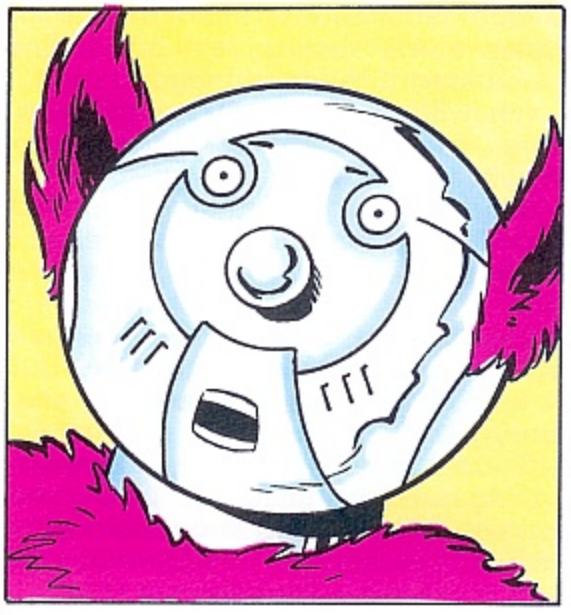
'Looks like we travelled in time after all,' said Cheetara, 'But back into the past of Third Earth, not Thundera.'

'Did we, Cheetara?' questioned Lynz-O. 'Or is this our future? Are the Thundercats long gone?' Lion-O was silent for a long moment before turning to face the Thundercats.' It's time we found out,' he said.

Marching north-west through the dense forests surrounding the Plain of Fertility, Lion-O, Cheetara, Snarf and the Wilykittens headed for the one place on Third Earth where they were assured of a friendly welcome. 'Sure hope there's plenty of Berbilfruit for a while,' said Wilykit, eyeing the little Thundercook's generous stomach as he waddled purposefully forward. 'While we're playing questions and answers, young Wilykitten, why weren't you in school this morning?' asked Snarf crossly.

'Which morning?' asked Wilykit. 'Cats' Lair is either far in the future or far in the past. We're either much too young or much too old for school now!' Snarf snorted impatiently, sucking in his stomach. Lion-O had halted at the edge of the forest, and as he parted the bushes, all caught their breath in shock.

Berbil Village lay in ruins. The cracked, moss-grown streets lay bleak and bare, scant heaps of rubble remaining where had once been a bustling, colourful community of mushroom houses. A few sad weeds, bearing dull purple berries that might have been blighted Berbilfruit



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struggled into life above the blasted ground. The wind made a hollow, lowing sound as it gusted through the limp grass. As the Thundercats stared in horror there was a rustling from the nearby branches and a thin, bedraggled Berbil rushed past. 'Ro-Ber-Belle!' cried Cheetara. The little Berbil froze to the spot, trembling, not daring to meet her eyes. 'P-please don't punish me,' she whimpered. 'I - I've been working all night – I must have fallen asleep in the bushes ...'

'Easy, Belle,' said Lion-O, placing a comforting hand on the quivering Berbil's shoulder. Ro-Ber-Belle became rigid with fear.

'What's the matter?' the Thundercat leader asked soothingly. 'We're your friends! Don't you recognise us?'

'P-please,' sobbed Belle. 'I'll say anything you want – just don't report me to Mayor S-S-Slithe ...' The Thundercats exchanged dumbfounded glances. *'Mayor* S-S-Slithe?'

'Danger approaches, fellow Thundercats,' said Lynx-O, climbing into the airlock where Panthro and Tygra were working. 'You're darn tootin' right it does,' said Panthro, emerging hot and uncomfortable from an inspection panel. "'Cause unless this hunk'a junk shows some results real soon, I'm gonna start throwin' things ...'

'What danger, Lynx-O?' said Tygra, more calmly. 'We're miles from anywhere out here.'

'Blindness brings other gifts,' said Lynx-O. 'And with every other sense I possess, I tell you *we are not alone here.*'

'You could be right,' said Bengali airily, to break the sudden tension. 'But we won't know until we take a look-see. Pumyra?'

'Good idea,' Pumyra grinned, leaping out of her seat. 'We'll scout the perimeter of the Plain and rendezvous back here in an hour. As Lion-O is so fond of saying, "Thundercats Ho!"

Parting the bushes, Lion-O, Cheetara, Snarf and the Wilykittens stepped out onto the great tract of land that was the Berbils' farming reservation. Usually neatly tended and abundant with life, the fields were wild and unkempt, crops and fences veering at strange and careless angles as far as the eye could see. Also in the fields were the former inhabitants of Berbil Village.



'They look so – *beaten*,' said Cheetara, her eyes brimming with tears. Thin and bedraggled, dressed in rags, the small ro-bears toiled exhaustedly, pulling ploughs across the fields with sad resignation. No-one spoke. The only sound was of wheezing, groaning and the occasional fit of thin, electronic coughs. And in the centre of the field, grinning astride the Mutant Fistpounder as he pursued a group of terrified Berbils, was the unmistakable fat, green form of S-S-Slithe. 'So this is what the Mutants have been up to while we were away,' said Lion-O, his voice flat with rage. 'I'll teach that reptilian slug a lesson he'll not soon forget ...' Drawing the Sword of Omens, the Thundercat lord brandished it high in the air.

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'Thunder ... Thunder ... Thundercats ... Ho!'
A scarlet pillar of light lanced into the clouds, bathing the skies of Third Earth in the symbol of a great cat's head. Berbils and Mutants alike froze, dumbstruck. 'Thundercats to the rescue!' roared Lion-O, charging across the field with all the strength in his powerful legs.
S-S-Slithe screamed as the lord of the Thundercats leapt into the cockpit of the Fistpounder, carrying him clear of the machine to land awkwardly on the hard soil, 'While the cat's away, the Mutants will play, is it, S-S-Slithe?' Lion-O raged.

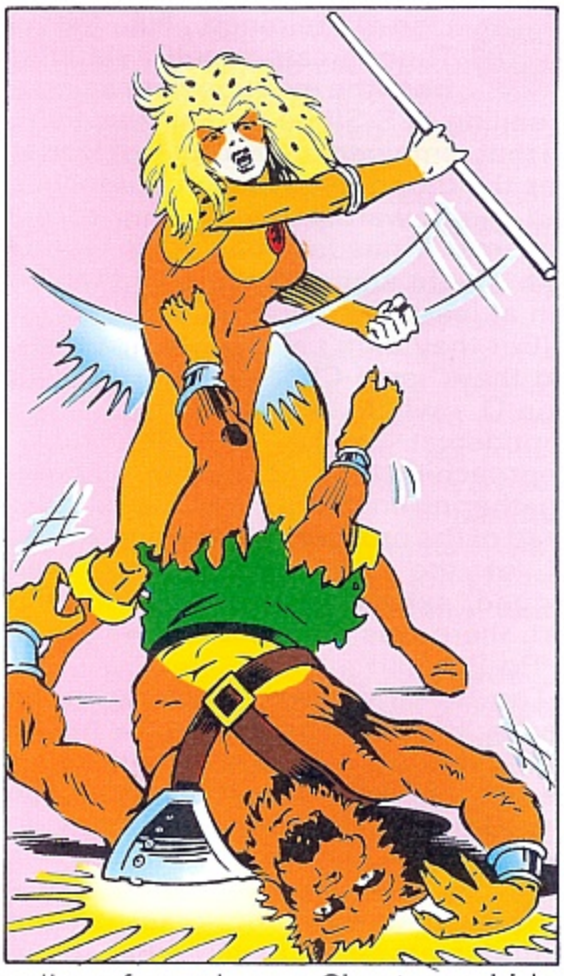
'W-who are you?' whimpered the reptilian, semi-paralysed with fear. Lion-O caught his breath, perplexed by the Mutant's words, and S-S-Slithe dealt him a crushing blow across the temple with a loose rock.

'Get the woman, Jackalman,' commanded the Mutant Monkian, leaping out of the Fistpounder. 'I'll take the kids and the troll.'

'*Troll*?' gasped Snarf, breathless with fury. As Monkian, pounced he swung about, catching the charging Mutant a bone-jarring crack across the jaw with his trail. 'The name's Felis Snarfus Lacertilia Felidae, apeface!'

Dazed and terrified, Monkian stumbled away into the undergrowth clutching his jaw. 'Mangy troll broke my tooth,' he wailed, and was gone.

'Stand by for a black eye, toots!' grinned Jackalman, squealing with cruel glee as he bore down on Cheetara, his fist whirling like a mace. The grin widened as he pounced – and landed flat on his face in an uncomfortably stony part of the field. The woman was gone – how could anyone have moved so fast? 'Tut, tut, Mutant,' said a voice that seemed to be behind, in front of, and all around him at once. 'Didn't your mother teach you that it's cowardly to hit girls?' The words were followed by a stunning



volley of punches as Cheetara whirled around the stricken Jackalman. As the dazed Mutant stood, knock-kneed and swaying in the field, she unclipped her quarterstaff. 'You see sometimes,' she said, striking him under the jaw with all her strength, 'some of them hit back.' Jackalman toppled slowly to the ground like a felled tree.

'KAA-YAAA!' Wilykit ducked just in time as the wild, shrieking form of Vultureman swooped over her in a blistering rush of feathers. As the airborne Mutant passed, Wilykit reached into his pouch, producing his lariat. Whirling it at breathtaking speed he caught Vultureman around the ankle. 'Come home to roost, feather brain,' he cried, as he and Wilykit tugged sharply on the rope. With an agonised squawk Vultureman plummetted to the ground, and was still.

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Lion-O rejoined his fellow Thundercats, still panting from the exertion of chasing a squalling S-S-Slithe across the field. All that remained of the reptilian leader was the thunderous crash of branches and the cowardly trumpetting of his screams. 'I needed that,' said Lion-O with a tight smile. 'An enemy that we can at least see – and fight!'

'But they didn't recognise us either, did they?' said Cheetara quietly. 'Oh, Lion-O, what *is* going on?' The Thundercat leader did not reply. Approaching them across the field was a gathering crowd of Berbils and, at the head of the procession, was one whom all of the Cats recognised. Even ragged, exhausted and streaked with dirt, there was no mistaking –

'Ro-Ber-Bill!'

The Berbil gasped, stopping in his tracks, 'H-how do you know my name, feline stranger?' he asked. The other Berbils began to murmur. The Thundercat leader sighed in exasperation. 'My name is Lion-O,' he said. 'Don't you remember? Berbil's eyes clouded with emotions that the Thundercats had never seen there before. Suspicion, and hate. 'It's a trick,' he said. 'None could defeat the Mutants so easily. You are emissaries of Emperor Mumm-Ra! You must be!'

'Ro-Ber-Bill, please!' said Cheetara. 'Don't you know us?'

'I've *never* seen you before, *ever*,' said Bill, his voice breaking.

The little Berbil was on the verge of tears. 'Is it not enough that you enslave our people and destroy our homes? Leave us alone!' The rest of the Berbils joined the chant, picking up stones and rocks from the surrounding field. 'Leave us alone! Leave us alone!' Wincing painfully as a sharp stone struck him on the shoulder, Lion-O motioned to his fellow Cats. Argument was useless. They ran.

Panting and exhausted, Bengali made a final circuit of a field on the outskirts of the Plain of Fertility before staggering to a halt, his breath coming in ragged gasps. As fresh and alert as ever, Pumyra sped to his side. 'Any time you're ready to take up my workout routine, just say the word,' said the female Thundercat with a grin. Bengali gave a grunt. 'It probably comes easier to someone with the speed of a leopard, anyway,' he panted. 'Find anything?'

'Nothing,' Pumyra sighed. 'Thought I saw the Thundercat symbol in the sky to the north, but when I looked back it had gone.' 'It's as though we're alone on the entire planet,' Bengali said, sadly. 'This Third Earth feels ... different. Even *smells* different. I – '

'Ssshh,' hissed Pumyra. Both froze into stillness. From the trees came the pounding of hooves.

Hammerhand burst into the clearing, digging his huge metal heels sharply into the flanks of Ribstomper, his horse. The great stallion whinnied in pain as he clattered to a halt. 'Blisterin' barnacles, me buckos,' smirked the Berserker captain, as Cruncher and Ram-Bam cantered into view behind him. 'We've got ourselves a couple of stray cats!' A cruel light entered the Berserkers' eyes as they trotted slowly forward. 'Hold it right there,' said Bengali, with as much authority as he could muster. 'We had enough of you creeps when you invaded us on Destiny Atoll!' 'Cheeky runt, ain'tcha?' leered Cruncher, with a snarl that deepened the scars on his ugly face. 'Talks in riddles, too,' sneered Ram-Bam. 'Who'd invade a barren sand-heap like Destiny Atoll? No-one ain't never lived there. . .' Hammerhand was still staring at the two Thundercats, his eyes agleam with calculation and greed. 'Couple of well-fed kitty-cats,' he said with a snort. 'Rich too, I'll be bound. Carryin' any trinkets, are ya?' The Berserkers were now circling the two Thundercats on their horses, looming threateningly close. 'I've got something for you right

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here, pirate,' said Pumyra, uncoiling her belt-sling. With a strong, deft movement she caught the surprised Berserker around the wrist. The weight of Hammerhand's own massive arm dragged him clear of the horse, and he landed heavily. Ram-Bam and Cruncher roared with astonished anger as they leapt from their own horses. '*We* rule in these parts, kitty-cats,' said Cruncher with a low growl, as he advanced menacingly on Pumyra. 'When we say "jump," you ask "how high?" Get it?'

'Is this high enough?' asked Bengali, leaping into the air and driving a powerful kick into the Berserker's jaw. Cruncher reeled backward, cursing. Seconds later Bengali was himself knocked flying as Ram-Bam drove headlong into him from behind. 'This is how we treat trespassers in Berserker country, whiskers.' sniggered the buccaneer. 'Then it's time for a lesson in hospitality, handsome,' grinned Pumyra, stepping into the open and whirling her belt-sling. With a bellow of rage Ram-Bam powered himself for a full scale charge. Pumyra ducked just as Hammerhand, who had been sneaking up behind her, swung his mighty metal piledriver of a fist with all his considerable strength. There was the ugly clang of metal upon metal and both Berserkers bounced explosively across the field, unconscious. Pumyra rejoined Bengali as he dusted the grass from his own tunic. 'Sloppy,' he said. 'The Berserkers I know would never have left themselves so open to attack.' Pumyra frowned. 'But didn't even recognise us! And that crack about Destiny Atoll. . .' Bengali fell silent, his hackles rising. Unnoticed, Pumyra's ears swivelled forward in feline curiousity. 'Do you feel it?' she whispered.



In the heart of a marble palace, standing over a crimson cauldron, the tall, powerful figure of the Emperor of Third Earth chuckled softly to himself. 'It's as though we're being watched,' said the image of the female cat creature as it rippled in the cauldron's murky waters. 'Fascinating,' murmured Mumm-Ra the Ever-Living. The light in his dim, onyx-walled sanctum glinted off teeth like knives as he smiled. . . and began to plot.

Tygra and Panthro sat outside the *Sargasso*, watching the amber skies of early evening with heavy hearts. 'I've never felt so helpless,' said Panthro. 'Ship ticks over like a dream – but without Thundrillium she's as much use as a toothless sabrecat. We'd have better luck waitin' for a passing Gomplin.' Tygra's thoughts were elsewhere. 'They've been a long time,' he muttered. 'I hope nothing went wrong. . .'

'Our friends approach,' said Lynx-O, appearing at the *Sargasso*'s airlock door. 'Lynx-O, how can you possibly –' begun Tygra irritably, but Panthro was already pointing across the field. Approaching them, Pumyra and Bengali close behind, were Lion-O, Cheetara, Snarf and the Wilykittens. 'They're –' began Panthro '– back,' said Cheetara, instantly beside them.



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Outside the *Sargasso* the skies darkened into evening as the sun set slowly on the beached hulk of the great Ark Ship. Inside, the bridge thrummed gently around the Thundercats as they talked 'It's obvious,' Tygra was saying. 'We've travelled back into our own past!' Lion-O shook his head.

'Unlikely,' he said. 'The Mutants are here too, remember – and they arrived on Third Earth at the same time as us.'

'But how is that possible, Lion-O?' asked Pumyra.

'Jaga told me that dark forces were at work on Hook Mountain,' said Lion-O grimly. 'On the whole of Third Earth, who do we know with the power to pull a stunt like this?' The response was instantaneous. 'Mumm-Ra!' the Thundercats chorused. 'Right,' said Lion-O. 'So it's time we ceased to be pawns in this evil game of his. It's time we became players.'

'Did we have to set off this early, Lion-O?' moaned Wilykit, squinting ahead into the early morning gloom.'It's not even light yet!'

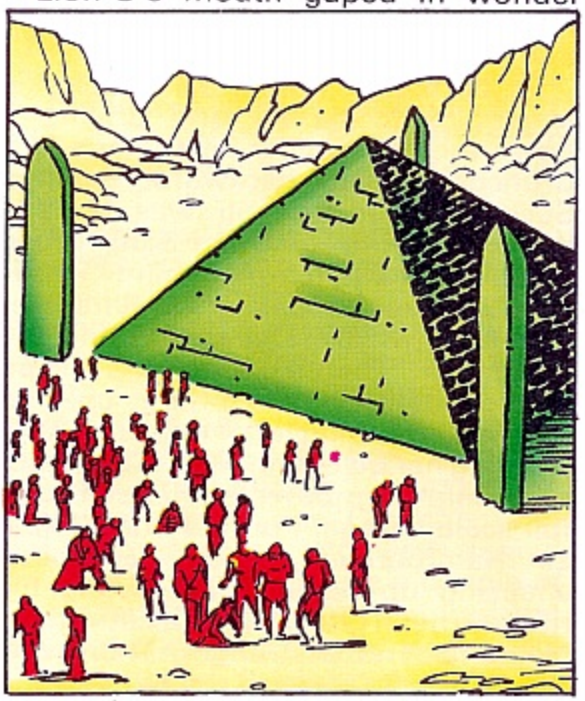
'The element of surprise is all-important, Wilykit,' said Lion-O. 'The early Thundercat catches – '

'Pneumonia,' groaned Snarf, sneezing violently. 'At times likes these an old Thundercat should be tucked up in bed with a good book and a glass of mulled Berbilfruit wine!'

'We should'a reached the Desert of Phosphorous Sands by now,' Panthro said glumly. 'You sure we're goin' the right way?'

Lion-O too was beginning to doubt his sense of direction. Instead of the parched soil and thin grey sand that usually bordered Mumm-Ra's desert, the grass beneath their feet was lush and thick. A chittering of morning birdsong was now audible in the surrounding bushes, but with it came another sound. It was the sound of many voices, mingled in pain, misery and exhaustion. Padding stealthily forward, the Thundercats parted the bushes. Long shadows were creeping from around trees as the purple haze of dawn broke over a rich and opulent Onyx Pyramid, the same, yet not the same dark, blasted structure of their shared memory. Beyond the pyramid was a palace, its jade and marble towers climbing high into the morning sky. The scene would have been one of breathtaking beauty – if not for the slaves.

Lion-O's mouth gaped in wonder



and horror as the miserable ranks stumbled past. All the peoples of Third Earth were represented in the sorry collection of slaves – Berbil, Wollo, Rockmen, Nai, Crabmen, Jivarrn – and Thugrons, galloping back and forth on horseback as they flailed their cruel electro-lashes at the slaves. Large, apelike creatures, whom Lion-O recognised as enslaved Snowmen, toiled in droves on a giant treadle, powering the palace's powerful generators. Ragged Tuskas tilled the fields as their Gomplins, thin and exhausted, proud wings lashed to their sides, towed great hoppers of grain. The scene was one of pure nightmare. 'So much for the night-shift,' said Panthro absently.

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Lion-O was trembling with rage. 'This time that twisted maniac has gone too far,' he hissed, a deep growl of fury building in his breast. In one movement he drew the Sword of Omens, the Eye of Thundera in her hilt already glowing with the fiery intensity of his own fury. 'For the peoples of Third Earth and the liberty of all! Thunder. . .Thunder. . . Thundercats – HO!'



Slaves and slavers alike scattered in terror at the sight of all ten Thundercats in full battle charge as they pounded across the field. 'To the Onyx Pyramid!' roared Lion-O. 'To victory!' The Thugrons' horses bolted, catapulting most of their riders into the air as the warrior cats thundered past. Those Thugrons not stunned by the fall scrambled to their feet and fled in a screaming tide. 'Mumm-Ra!' raged Lion-O, crimson lightning flickering and dancing about the Sword of Omens. 'Come out and fight! The time has come to pay for your crimes!'

To the Thundercats' surprise, the main entrance to the Onyx Pyramid slid immediately open. Silhouetted in the floodlit interior was a figure all recognised. Though he was taller, stronger and straighter than they remembered, there was no mistaking the eyes; crimson pools of evil. Mumm-Ra the Ever-Living flashed his razor teeth in a smile as he began to clap. 'Oh, very good,' he boomed, with a gale of rich, hearty laughter. 'all *most* impressive. Do come in. . .'

'I've got an idea,' said Panthro through clenched teeth, as the Thundercats padded warily into the palatial Inner Sanctum of the Onyx Pyramid. 'Why don't we all just pinch ourselves real hard. I really wanna wake up now. . .'

'I have been observing you for some time,' Mumm-Ra said in a conversational tone. He turned to them with what might have been a charming smile on the face of anyone who was not seven feet tall, green, and wearing a helmet encrusted with golden snakes. 'A hobby of mine,' he said, indicating the darkly-bubbling cauldron in the centre of the chamber. 'We know all about your mystic cauldron, evil Mumm-Ra,' hissed Wilykat. 'Evil?' said the devil-priest in mock horror. 'Oh, surely not. As a matter of fact I was about to offer all of you steady employment. With full pay, of course,' he added generously.

'Talk plainly, Mumm-Ra,' Lion-O said coldly, with a curl of the lip. 'You're feline, aren't you?' smiled the devil-priest, ignoring him. 'Yes – the eyes and claws give you away, you know. I've been very impressed with what I've seen of your fighting abilities so far. *Very* impressed.'

'We are the Thundercats, as you well know, evil one,' said Lynx-O. 'It's way past time you did some tall explainin', mean green,' Panthro snarled.

'Oh very well,' said the devil-priest, with a trace of irritation. 'I offer all of you a lifetime of luxury – anything you

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desire – if you will join the Palace Guard as my Imperial Shocktroopers.' 'This is the final insult!' roared Lion-O, unsheathing the Sword of Omens. 'Your reign of terror ends here!'

Laughing, Mumm-Ra gave an almost careless wave of his hand. The sword flew from the Thundercat leader's grasp, whistling across the chamber to embed itself in a wall. Instantly Panthro leapt into the fray, numbchucks whirling. 'Laugh this off, slimeball!' he yelled. Waving his hand again, the devil-priest transformed the numbchucks into a pair of giant snakes. Panthro fell struggling to the ground as he was enfolded in their slippery coils. Tygra and Cheetara exchanged glances. 'Go!' cried Tygra. As the female Thundercat sped around Mumm-Ra's Inner Sanctum at her full velocity, dazzling the devil-priest, Tygra began to whirl his bolo-whip. In less than a second, he was invisible. He began to creep toward the gloating figure of the sorceror. 'Must you rush everything, little one?' Mumm-Ra chuckled. 'Do slow down – in fact, why not stop altogether?' he smirked, with another wave of his hand. Cheetara froze into absolute immobility, but the momentum of her run carried her, clattering, into the far wall of the Sanctum. She fell, dazed. 'And you', the devil-priest said kindly, focusing directly on the invisible Tygra. 'Invisibility is quite a skill – but why not become intangible, too?' The bolo-whip fell uselessly from Tygra's grip as his fingers passed directly through it. With a surge of panic, he felt himself begin to sink into the floor. . .



Lion-O struggled to reach the Sword of Omens, but found himself rooted to the spot. He motioned to the remaining Thundercats. 'Attack formation!' he ordered. 'Rush him!' Almost casually Mumm-Ra nodded his head once, and the floor dropped steeply away beneath the charging Thundercats. 'Forgive me,' the devil-priest said with mock-dismay. 'I failed to give you the complete guided tour. Allow me to introduce the Slime Pits of Grizquetr!' One by one the Thundercats felt their fingers begin to slip on the dark, smooth stone as they slithered into the gruesome depths of the Onyx Pyramid. . .



Even as the Thundercats fell toward certain doom, the Inner Sanctum of the Pyramid was plunged into total darkness. The temperature in the great stone vault plummetted below zero in less than a second, a cold deeper and icier even than Hook Mountain. A figure was forming in the room, towering high into the eaves of the crimson chamber. The figure of a man made of stars and darkness. An unearthly hush descended on the room as Mumm-Ra froze into the strange, limp stillness of a puppet with its strings cut. At once the floor levelled, Tygra reappeared and Cheetara climbed stiffly to her feet. Lion-O, his strange paralysis gone, gathered the dazed Thundercats around him. The only sound now was the breathing of the stranger, like surf on a far distant shore.

'Shapeshade!' said the Thundercat leader in wonder.

'It is indeed I, Thundercats, 'replied

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the stranger in a voice like tumbling stone walls. 'Shapeshade the Mystic, Keeper of the Sign of Six, Guardian of Third Earth – and father of Mumm-Ra.'

'Then it was you I saw gliding above the *Sargasso*,' Lion-O said. 'You've been following us!'

'More than following, little one,' Shapeshade said softly. 'There is no *Sargasso* – at least, not beyond the illusion I created from your own minds.'

Cheetara gave a gasp of disbelief. 'Then this is all some kind of illusion?' she said, her fist tightening in anger. 'You've been toying with us?'

'In a moment of time I have shown you the future of Third Earth,' Shapeshade said quietly, *'had the Thundercats never existed.* As you have seen, it is a sorry world without you. I would have you remain on Third Earth, and continue the battle against my son,' 'But if you can do all this, why not defeat him yourself?' asked Lynx-O.

'Vengeance is not the way of Shapeshade, little one,' said the figure, with a flurry of icy chill. 'Mumm-Ra's crimes are many – but there can be no greater punishment for him than that the Thundercats remain on Third Earth – and continue to foil his evil schemes. Please stay.'

'But Thundera,' Lion-O asked sadly. 'Is she really gone forever?' 'Your spiritual guide spoke wisely, Thundercat,' said Shapeshade, the edges of his indistinct form already beginning to shimmer and blur. 'Forget past mistakes and future fears. Open your eyes to the here and now. . .' And then he was gone, the darkness lifting to the warmth and light of a new day on the Plain of Fertility.



Ahead of them, tall and proud in the sunlight, stood the great stone head of Cats' Lair. The Thundercats' eyes misted with a mixture of sadness and a joy too great for words as they began to walk, and then finally to run toward it. Around them in the fields several Berbils smiled and waved as they passed. 'Thundera is gone,' said the voice of Shapeshade, following them across the fields in a final rush of winter. 'But Third Earth needs her heroes. This is the destiny of the Thundercats. . .'



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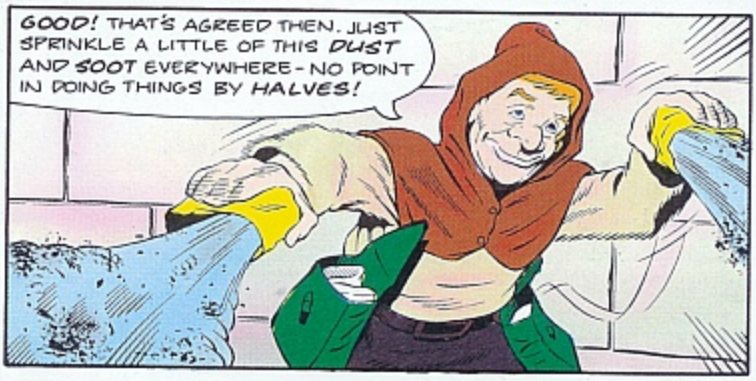
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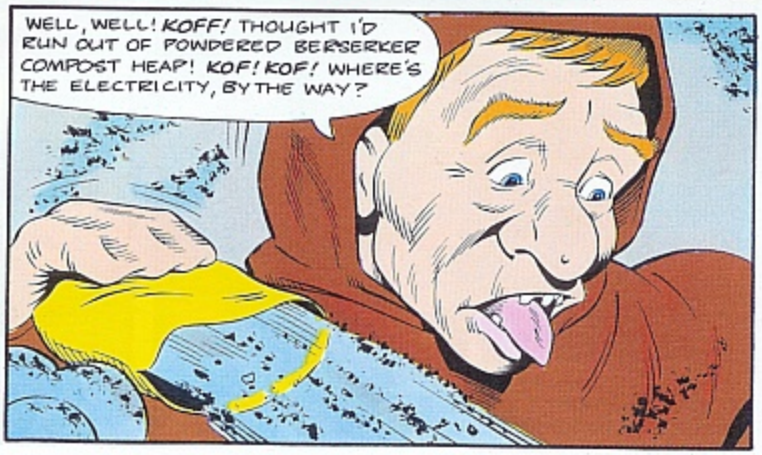


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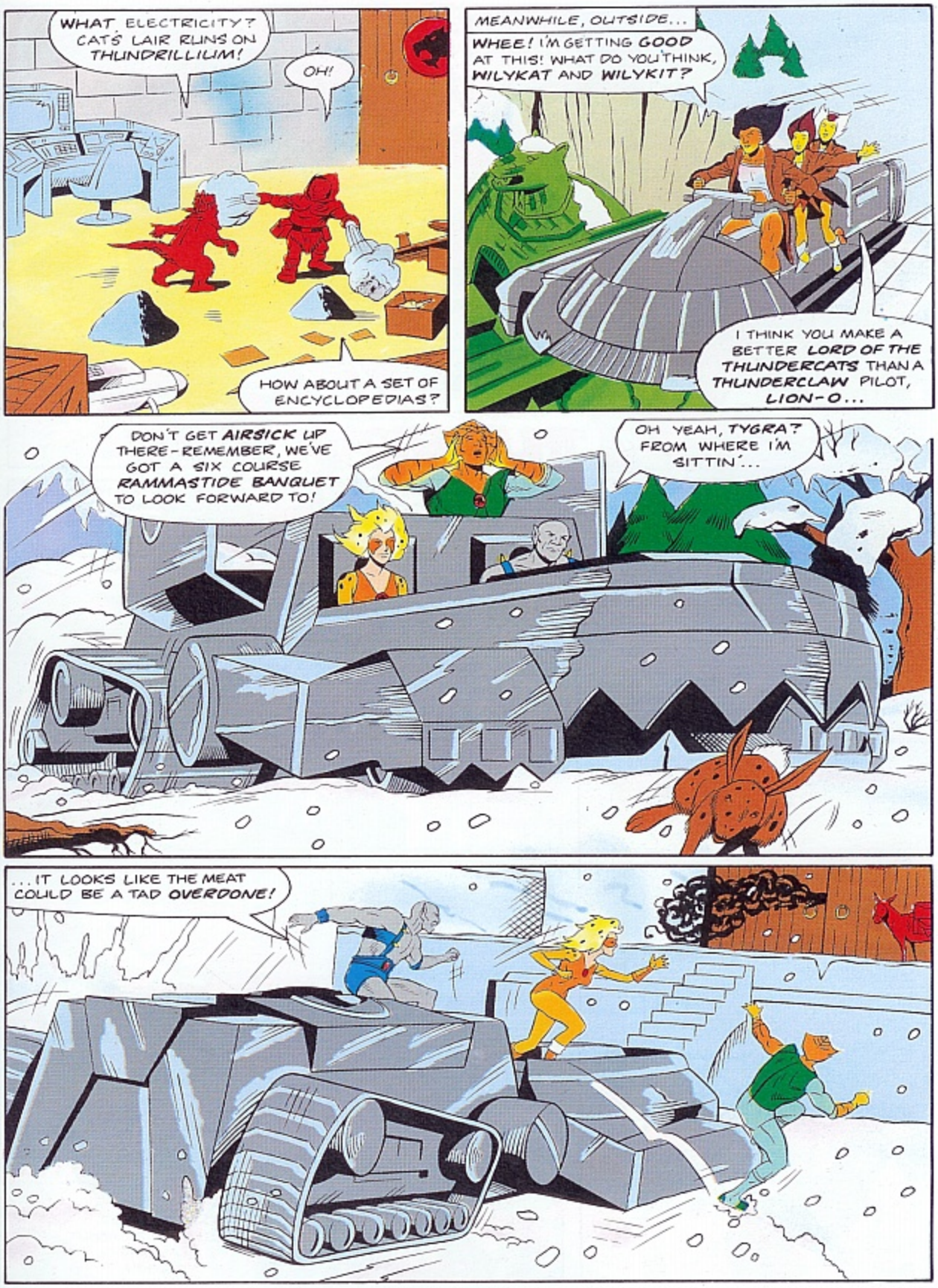








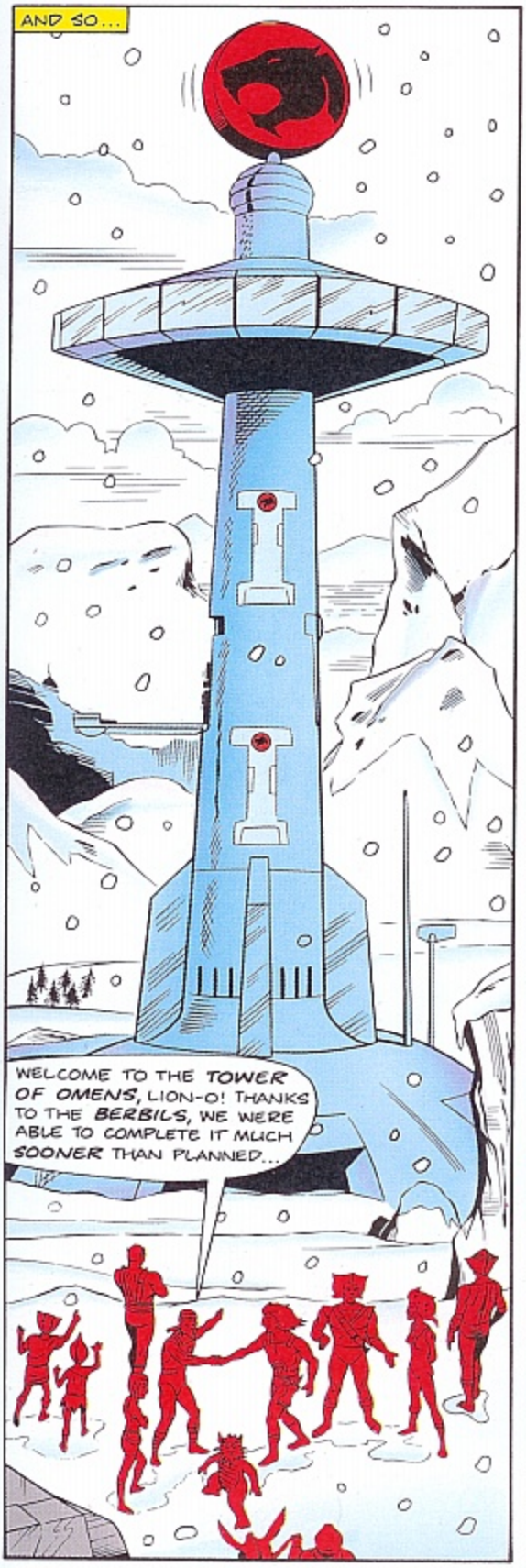
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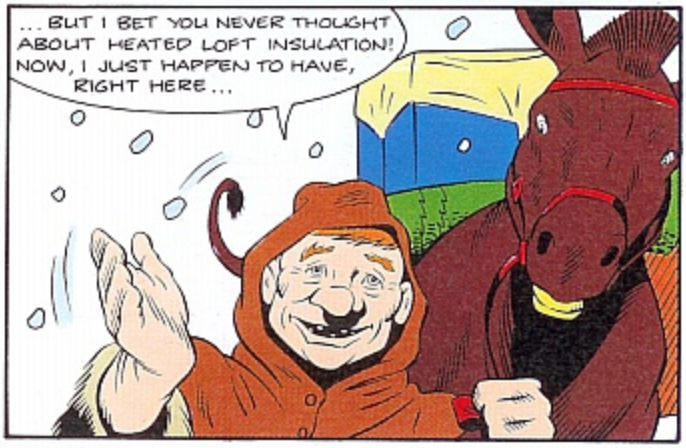
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