

Storm of Thundera

By Clare

Chapter 11

"Grimla!"

Through my haze, I registered the fact that Lizarius had just marched in and was currently berating the Psy Lunatac who had been trying to probe my mind. "You were told not to usssssse your powerssssss on thisssss boy!" the Reptilian Mutant hissed. "You were told he wassssss not to be harmed until he had sssssssspoken to reveal the location of hissssss fragment of the Sssssstatue!"

"Begging your pardon, Lizarius," Grimla said with feigned humility. "But I thought you wanted the information as quickly as possible. I know it was risky, but what else did you expect me to do?"

"I expect you to follow orderssssssss!" Lizarius shot back. "And my orderssssss were that the information we need wasssssss to be extracted through meansssssss other than your powerssssssss!" My eyes were closed throughout this heated exchange - it hurt too much to open them - but I could imagine the looks on my captors' faces. Lizarius, proud and imperious, glaring at the Lunatac who had gone against his wishes, while Grimla glared back at him with a defiant expression on her face. I had seen enough of the Cult of Mumm-Ra by now to know that its members felt no friendship for each other, only a fanatical devotion to achieving their aims. No matter what the cost . . .

Lizarius moved closer to me and leaned over so that his face was only inches from mine. Once more, I caught the full blast of his rancid breath, which smelled so rank that I felt physically sick. "For the lasssst time," he said in his hissing Reptilian voice, "tell me what I want to know!"

"Never!" I managed to force the word out, struggling against the haze Grimla's powers had put me under. I did not know what she had done to my mind, only that it had caused me considerable pain when I tried to resist, tried to keep her from accessing the knowledge she wanted. It was probably only thanks to Lizarius that she hadn't ended up killing me, but I knew I was no better off with him as an interrogator. Nonetheless, I was determined not to give him the satisfaction of forcing me to speak.

"In that casssse . . ." Lizarius said. Then, he turned and called to someone outside. "Bring in the girl! We'll ssssee if a threat to her misssserable life can make thisssss brat talk!"

I forced my eyes open just in time to see the female Reptilian, Karsa, dragging Jaya (whose hands were bound behind her back) into the room, with Gravlok walking alongside them. Jaya looked at Lizarius defiantly, as if daring him to do whatever he wanted to her, no matter what it

was. "Bring it on!" she shouted, struggling against her bonds. "Unlike you, I am no coward! I am . . ."

She got no further before Gravlok, at a signal from Lizarius, stepped forward and put his hands round her throat. He squeezed, lightly at first but gradually increasing the pressure until Jaya was forced to her knees, struggling for breath. "Now then, Thunderbrat," Lizarius said to me. "Gravlok issss quite capable of breaking her neck - sssso I sssssuggests you co-operate if you want her to live much longer. Now, tell me - where isssss the Ssssstatue fragment?"

"Don't . . . tell . . . him!" Jaya managed to choke out, as Gravlok kept up the relentless pressure on her throat. It was plain from the expression on his face that Gravlok was enjoying himself, that he was going to keep the pressure up for as long as it took for me to cave in and tell them what they wanted to know. Unable to do anything to help my friend, I said nothing and lay still, trying to avert my eyes from the sight of Jaya vainly struggling against the powerful grip of the Graviton Lunatac. It was a struggle she couldn't possibly win; even though she was a Warrior Maiden and very tough, there are few who can withstand the strength of a member of the Graviton race.

"Are you ready to talk yet?" Lizarius demanded at length.

"I'll never betray my people!" I shot back. That, I now understood, was what they meant by the word "Loyalty", one of the four main tenets of the Code of Thundera.

Lizarius's only response was to turn to Gravlok, who was still keeping up the pressure on Jaya's throat. "Finissssh her!" he ordered, his tone filled with menace and an underlying sense that he took a sadistic pleasure in this sort of thing.

But, as a tear rolled down Jaya's cheek, I realised I could not allow this to happen. I was a Thundercat and, as such, could not allow an innocent to die, no matter what the circumstances. "Stop!" I shouted, my head still pounding from Grimla's probing. "I - I'll talk . . ."

Before I could say anything, however, there was a sudden commotion at the entrance to the room. Then, my father, Ocelotra, Kayon, Pumar and Queen Tia swept in, all of them with their weapons drawn. My father was brandishing the Sword of Omens (which he had evidently managed to retrieve) in front of him, a fierce battle-light in his eyes. I had seen him carry the Sword on ceremonial occasions many times, but I had never seen him wield it in battle. It was as if he had become a whole different Thundercat, one who would let nothing stand in his way.

"HOOOOOOOOO!" he shouted, raising the Sword above his head, as the mystic blade began to crackle with electricity. Seconds later, a bolt of white lightning shot out of the Sword and began zapping every Mutant and Lunatac in the room, but leaving Jaya and myself unharmed. I was not surprised by this because, though I had never seen the Sword of Omens in action before, I knew it had the power to tell friend from foe and would never harm a Thundercat or one of their allies.

In any case, it quickly put Lizarius and his cronies out of action, leaving them slumped unconscious on the floor.

"That oughta put them out of action for a while," said Ocelotra. She then turned her attention to me. "Storm? Can you walk?"

"I - I think so," I told her. To be honest, I hadn't tried even tried to stand yet, never mind walk. There was only one way to find out. I tried to pull myself up off the table I had been lying on, only for my head to start spinning uncontrollably as soon as I moved. "Guess not," I said with a wry smile on my face, vaguely aware that Tia was examining Jaya. The young Warrior Maiden had fingermarks on her throat from where Gravlök had tried to throttle her, but otherwise seemed unharmed.

That was the last thing I saw before passing out.

The next thing I remember is waking up to find myself back in the Refuge, my mother sitting beside me. "W - what happened?" I asked her. My head still ached slightly, but it wasn't as bad as it had been immediately after Grimla used her powers on me.

"Don't try to talk," my mother said. "You were captured by the Cult of Mumm-Ra, you and Jaya. Don't you remember?"

I nodded, wondering how much time had passed since my ordeal in Castle Plundarr. "Is Jaya OK?" I asked. "And what happened to Koris?"

"They're both fine. Jaya's got some bruising on her throat, but, aside from that, she wasn't hurt. As for Koris, your father, Pumar and Kayon ran into him while on patrol and brought him back here. He told us that the three of you had some foolish idea about taking on the Cult of Mumm-Ra single-handed, which meant we had to devise a rescue plan. And, for that, they needed the Sword of Omens."

"So they took Ocelotra and Tia and slipped into Castle Plundarr . . ." My mother paused for a moment, then continued. "Anyway, long story short - they found the Sword and managed to retrieve it. And, just when they did, it began growling to warn your father that you were in danger . . ."

I did not pay much attention to the rest of my mother's explanation; my mind was replaying what she had said about the Sword alerting my father to the danger I was in. I had heard stories about the Sword's ability to detect when a Thundercat was in danger, but more than eighty years of peace meant that had not happened in my lifetime and had only happened twice since Lion-O's day. The Eye of Thundera had mostly remained dormant in the intervening years, but now it seemed it was waking up again. And I had been the one to wake it.

"Anyway," my mother finished, "your father will be wanting words with all three of you, but at least you're all safe."

"I - I guess so," I said, realising that my attempt to prove I was old enough to handle myself had just backfired badly. Not only had Jaya and I been captured by the Cult of Mumm-Ra and had to be rescued, we (and Koris) would shortly be getting the reprimand of our lives.

A few hours later, Jaya, Koris and I stood side-by-side, facing my father, Kayon and Queen Tia, who had become the unofficial leaders of those in the Refuge. Unable to bring myself to look into my father's eyes, I kept my gaze fixed firmly on the ground, as we waited for the inevitable lecture. I was used to being lectured by Snarf Emala, but that didn't make me hate it any less. And the worst thing was that I knew I deserved whatever punishment they decided to impose. Because of my recklessness, I had caused Jaya and myself to be captured and had nearly betrayed the hiding place of my piece of the Statue of Omens.

My father cleared his throat and began. "Storm of Thundera, Jaya of the Warrior Maidens, Koris of the Wollos," he said, without a trace of emotion in his voice, "you were given explicit instructions not to leave the Refuge, instructions you chose to ignore. Instead, the three of you went out, knowing full well that the Cult of Mumm-Ra were at large and, as a result, two of you were captured."

"What do you have to say for yourselves?" added Tia, leaning forward in her seat.

"Queen Tia," Jaya said, lowering herself to her knees, "it was Storm's idea. He thought that, if we could free those the Cult held prisoner, it would prove we could handle things on our own."

"Only, it didn't work out like that," Tia said. "Not only did you not free the Cult's prisoners, you and Storm were captured yourselves."

"And, had we not rescued you, you would still be in the Cult's clutches," Kayon added. "Which is the last thing any of us would want. Yes, we know the Cult are holding prisoners, but there are better ways of rescuing them than rushing in recklessly."

"What about the way you rushed in and rescued us?" I demanded, speaking for the first time since arriving in the room we were currently in. "What's the difference between that and what we tried to do?"

My father looked at me more sternly than I had ever seen him look at me before. "The difference, Storm, is that we had a plan in mind - a hastily devised plan, but still a plan. You three gave no thought to how you would achieve what you were setting out to do, no thought to how three teenagers could take on an enemy the size of the Cult. Yes, I'm well aware that you will be Lord of the Thundercats one day, but you need to temper your courage with wisdom and learn to know your limitations." He then turned to Tia and Kayon. "What do we do with those who disobey orders and put themselves in danger?" he asked.

There was a pause which lasted for several seconds and I began to speculate about what kind of punishment might be imposed on us. If we were supposed to be confined to the Refuge anyway, they couldn't very well ground us. And, with the Cult around, I doubted they would go to the opposite extreme and kick us out of the Refuge. I had heard of Thundercats being stripped of their title and made to remove the Insignia from their clothes, but I knew it was a punishment reserved for serious breaches of the Code of Thundera, not some teenaged misadventure. Besides, Jaya and Koris were not even Thunderians . . .

"Lord Feleo," Tia said at length, "Storm, Jaya and Koris did a foolish thing, but they are still children. And I think being captured by the Cult should be enough of a lesson in itself."

"I agree with Tia," Kayon added. "Hopefully, this experience will have taught them the importance of following orders and that, when we tell them to stay within the Refuge, we do so for their own safety."

My father paused to consider what they had just said, then spoke to announce his decision. "Very well - there will be no punishment, but I will give all three of you a formal warning. You must never again leave the Refuge without permission or without at least one adult. And you must certainly abandon any plans you might have for rescuing the Cult's prisoners by yourselves. And you, Storm, must learn to curb any foolish heroics you might be tempted to engage in. Being Lord of the Thundercats is a great responsibility and you need to face up to that and set an example to others. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Father," I said, looking him full in the face.

"Yes, Lord Feleo," Jaya and Koris said at the same time.

Grateful to have been let off with a warning, Koris, Jaya and I went to join the others. I had already resolved that I would try to do as my father had said and not attempt to take on the Cult of Mumm-Ra again, at least not without sufficient back-up. This was only one of many hard lessons I would have to learn on the path to becoming Lord of the Thundercats and I meant to learn them all. I recalled the names of my immediate ancestors - Claudus, Lion-O, Leonus, Feleo - all worthy Lords of the Thundercats, vowing that I too would prove worthy. Even so, it would be a few years yet before I would have to take the responsibility seriously; right now, I was determined to behave as much like a normal fourteen-year-old boy as I could given our current circumstances.

"Are you two up for a quick game?" I asked Koris and Jaya. There were a few games which Hunter and I used to play in the corridors of Cats' Lair back on New Thundera and I felt sure we could adapt them for the Refuge. If nothing else, it would kill time and take our minds off our confinement. And, with Snarf Emala on New Thundera, there would be no-one to keep butting in . . . Thinking of Snarf Emala reminded me of something, something which made me start laughing.

"What's so funny?" Jaya asked, surprised. I was not normally given to outbursts of spontaneous laughter.

"Sorry," I said, pulling myself together. "I was just thinking about the Snarf that looked after me when I was younger. Um, a Snarf is a sort of talking Thunderian animal," I added for the benefit of my two friends. "And many Thunderian families train them to look after their children. Anyway, the one in Cats' Lair on New Thundera is called Snarf Emala - and she's a right old fusspot."

"Go on," prompted Koris.

"Yes. Well, one day, my friend, Hunter, and I decided to play a trick on her. So we got hold of a bucket of green paint, took the top off and balanced it on the door to her quarters. Then, when she opened the door . . ." I began to laugh again at the memory of seeing a bright green (and very angry) Snarf storming down the corridors of Cats' Lair. It had taken Snarf Emala several baths to get all the green paint out of her fur, but, luckily for Hunter and I, she had never managed to pin the blame on either of us.

Laughing, Jaya, Koris and I arrived in what had become the main assembly area for the Refuge to find everyone gathered together. Composing myself, I walked up to my mother and asked her what was going on.

"A patrol caught a prisoner," she explained. "A Lunatac. She's being brought in right now."

"She?" I echoed, hoping against hope that this Lunatac wouldn't turn out to be Grimla. She was the last person I wanted to see right now, especially after the way she had tried to probe my mind. But, then, I heard a voice which I had last heard on my journey to Third Earth.

"You must listen to me! I need to see the Thundercats immediately!"

"You'll be seeing the Thundercats, all right," retorted a male voice. It was one of the humans who were here with Kayon, but I still didn't know any of their names. "And I'm sure they'll have plenty of questions to ask you."

"Icelia?" I thought to myself.