

Storm of Thundera

By Clare

Chapter 14

None of the things that had happened to me had prepared me for what I was seeing now. It seemed that the spirit form of a dead Thundercat elder had appeared before me, but I could hardly believe it was true. Nevertheless, there was no denying that whatever had manifested itself in my cell resembled Wilykit; I had known her all my life and there was no mistaking her.

"Wilykit?" I said again. "Are you a . . .?" I wanted to say the word "ghost", but, for some unknown reason, I found myself unable to do so.

"I am a visitor from the Netherworld," Wilykit replied. "And I'm here to tell you that time is short - the Cult of Mumm-Ra must be stopped."

"I know that!" I snapped back. "But what are we supposed to do? You're dead, I'm a prisoner and the Cult probably have that piece of the Statue of Omens you gave me by now." The whole situation looked hopeless. I had tried so hard to keep the Cult from getting their hands on my fragment of the Statue, but I had failed. Grimla and Lizarius had forced me to reveal where I had hidden it. But what choice did I have? If I hadn't told my captors what they wanted to know, they would have launched the Doomsday Missile and . . .

"There is one thing that might give us a chance," Wilykit replied. "A special power which the Sword of Omens possesses." As I looked at her blankly, she elaborated on what she had just said. "The Eye of Thundera can absorb the spirits of those who have wielded the Sword, greatly increasing its powers."

"How do you know that?" I asked, a note of scepticism in my voice. "I'm a future Lord of the Thundercats and no-one ever mentioned it to me."

Wilykit laughed slightly. "As you reminded me, I am dead. And, in the Netherworld, I can learn many secrets. Not only that, I once read of a time when this power was used before. Long ago, when Jaga was a young boy, the then Lord of the Thundercats called on the spirits of his predecessors to aid him in battle when all seemed lost. And those spirits entered the Eye of Thundera and . . ."

"I think I get the idea," I said, cutting her off in mid sentence. "So you think it'll work again?"

"If I can persuade enough spirits to agree, it should."

I would have questioned Wilykit further, but she chose that precise moment to vanish, leaving no sign that she had ever been present.

Left alone in my cell, I sat down and thought things over. I had been told that the Eye of Thundera had many amazing powers, but I'd never known it could absorb the spirits of those who had wielded it. Then again, from what Wilykit had said, the last time that had happened was long out of living memory; I'd been told Jaga was already an old man when Old Thundera was destroyed. Nonetheless, if it had been done before, I was certain it could be done again. The situation the Thundercats were currently in was certainly dire enough to require drastic action.

The only trouble was, how could this plan be carried out? I was a prisoner, with no way of knowing where my father was or what had happened to him. As the current Lord of the Thundercats, he should be the one to channel my ancestors through the Sword. But, if he had been captured, I knew he was highly unlikely to still have the Sword about his person; the Cult of Mumm-Ra would know it well enough by now to know that it was an immensely powerful weapons. And you don't leave immensely powerful weapons in the hands of your enemies.

And, even if my father was still free, how would I be able to get word to him? There was no way I would be able to escape from here by myself; the Cult of Mumm-Ra had the place too well guarded. No, it looked as though this would be one of those times where the good guys didn't win. It wouldn't be long before the Cult had found and destroyed all the pieces of the Statue and, when that happened . . .

Just then, my thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a key in the door. The next thing I knew, the door was flung open and I saw Lizarius standing outside my cell, flanked by Grimla and Jacklon. "Congratulationsssssss, Thunderbrat," Lizarius hissed at me. "You have given ussssss the meanssssss to ensssssure our triumph!"

For once, I ignored the fact that he had called me "Thunderbrat" yet again. "How have I done that?" I asked, keeping my tone of voice strictly neutral.

This time, it was Grimla who spoke. "Simple - when I showed you that false vision, I knew it would make you co-operate. That's one good thing about do-gooder races like you Thundercats; threaten to harm those close to them and they'll do whatever you want."

"You mean . . ." I paused. " . . . there never was a Doomsday missile trained on New Thundera?" I could hardly believe it. Had I betrayed Wilykit's trust for nothing? Was the image I had been shown of New Thundera being destroyed really just an illusion? I did not know, but what I did know was that, because of what the Cult had threatened to do to my planet, I had handed them my piece of the Statue. And I had fought so hard to keep them from getting hold of it.

"No," Grimla replied. "That was a lie to trick you into co-operating with us." She turned to Lizarius. "I think it's time."

"Yesssss," Lizarius agreed. "Bring him!"

Once more, I found myself being led towards the temple I had been brought to not long after I was first captured by the Cult. As I arrived, the first thing I saw was that the entire Cult seemed to be assembled here - and that wasn't all. Packed together in a frightened huddle, I saw several Third Earthlings, all with looks of abject despair on their faces. And one of them was a Wollo who looked uncannily like an older version of Koris; indeed, the resemblance was so striking that I did not need anyone to tell me that this was Lannal, the Wollo I had spoken to through a hole in the wall dividing our cells.

However, I did not have time to catch his eye before I was forced to the front of the throng and made to kneel on the ground. Lizarius took up his position in front of the crowd, facing them. Once again, he was wearing his ceremonial outfit - the wraparound skirt with a gold belt, the red cloak fastened with a buckle decorated with the image of a two-headed snake, a headdress bearing the same design as the buckle. He stepped forward, raising his arms.

"Memberssss of the Cult of Mumm-Ra," he proclaimed, "the hour of our triumph issss at hand. We have obtained all the fragmentsssss of the Ssssstatue and imbued them with evil magic, magic that will allow usssss to free Mumm-Ra from hissss imprissssonment in the Book of Omensssss!"

Even faced with this seemingly hopeless situation, I still had a spark of defiance. "How do you plan to do that?" I demanded. "There are only two means of accessing the Book and my parents keep both of them. So whatever you're planning to do won't work!"

Lizarius glared at me. "Ssstill assss rebellioussssss assss ever. Well, Thunderbrat, the magic we ussssed issss far ssssstronger than your puny defencesssss! Behold!" With that, he pulled something out of the folds of his skirt and held it aloft. I craned my neck to see what he was holding, then caught my breath. It was the fragment of the Statue which Wilykit had entrusted to me, but it was glowing with a light that I could only describe as evil. Seeing this, all I could feel was a dark despair. Had I, a future Lord of the Thundercats, truly failed in my duty to fight against evil? Had I just handed the Cult the means of freeing Mumm-Ra right on a platter?

I did not have long to think about this, however, before Lizarius began to chant. "Mumm-Ra, come! Mumm-Ra, come!" And, as he repeated those two words over and over, others in the crowd also produced pieces of the Statue, all of them bearing that same evil glow, and took up the chant.

"Mumm-Ra, come! Mumm-Ra, come! Mumm-Ra, come!"

As the infernal chanting continued, a thought occurred to me. The Cult thought they had all the pieces of the Statue, but they were missing two - and that could make all the difference. The Brutemen still had theirs; they had taken it with them when Lynxari and two of Kayon's men took them, the Berbils and Koris away from Third Earth. As did Icelia, though I still wasn't sure if she could be trusted. Still, if the Cult didn't have all the fragments, it might make all the difference.

"Or perhaps not," I murmured, as a terrible thunder rent the air and dark clouds suddenly descended on this very spot. Seconds later, I received a harsh blow from the Reptilian Mutant behind me.

"Ssssilence!" he hissed. "Show ssssome resssspect for our sssssacred ritual!"

"And, now," Lizarius said, looking up at the darkened sky, "it issss time for the Offeringsssss!" With that, he pointed imperiously to two trembling Bolkins who crouched, trembling, in the crowd of captive Third Earthlings. They clung to each other desperately, but were soon forced apart as two Psy Lunatacs grabbed them and hauled them to the front. For a moment, I wondered what role these simple folk could be about to play in this ritual, but, as they were forced to kneel on the ground and one of the Jackal Mutants handed Lizarius a huge two-headed axe, it all became horribly clear.

"No!" I cried. But it wasn't like I could stop Lizarius now; all I could do was close my eyes tightly and pray that I would be the next "Offering". That way, at least I would be spared hearing the deaths of too many innocent beings.

But, just when it seemed that all was lost, I heard the collective shout of a charging army advancing on the enemy. Opening my eyes, I saw the entire population of the Refuge (those who had stayed to fight, at least) advancing on the assembled Cult, my father, Tia and Kayon in the lead. Moving as one, they launched themselves at the assembled Mutants and Lunatacs, who seemed to be totally unprepared for the assault. All, that is, except Lizarius . . .

"Sssso," he hissed, "the cavalry hassssss come, hasssss it? Well, you're too late! Mumm-Ra issss already freed from hisssss prisssson and will shortly dessscent to Third Earth!" He gestured towards the sky, where a humanoid form was being to emerge from the clouds which had formed above this spot. Slowly, it descended to the ground, becoming steadily clearer as it did so, until a blue-skinned being with glowing red eyes emerged. On its chest was a design in the form of a two-headed snake on a red background, the same design that was on Lizarius's ceremonial robes.

Though I had never seen this being before, I needed no-one to tell me who he was. "Mumm-Ra!" I whispered, my eyes transfixed on the . . . thing that was descending from the sky. Everything about him spoke of an all-consuming evil, of a soul which lived only to conquer and oppress. Until now, I had had no idea what Mumm-Ra looked like and had imagined all sorts of horrors, but the reality was far worse. Imagine that all the demons of your childhood have combined to form one ultimate demon, more evil than all the others put together. That would be Mumm-Ra.

Then, he spoke and, for the first time in over eighty years, his evil voice was heard on Third Earth. "At last! I am free!" He looked down at the Mutants and Lunatacs who made up the Cult of Mumm-Ra. "As my loyal followers, you shall be the ones to police my new regime. And the first order of business will be doing what I failed to do eighty years ago - rid Third Earth of these infernal Thundercats!"

But my fellow Thundercats were not about to be taken without a fight and nor were their allies, who, I now noticed, included beings that had not been present in the Refuge. Tall, powerfully built humanoids dressed in thick furs and riding on giant cats with snow white fur charged towards the assembled Mutants and Lunatacs, together with an assortment of humans and Thunderians. Glancing up, I saw several dragon-like creatures circling round, all ridden by creatures which looked like anthropomorphic walruses.

Tia, at the head of the contingent of Warrior Maidens, was brandishing her spear as she led her Maidens into battle, Kayon's men charging alongside them. From the opposite side, the Thundercats charged towards their foes, weapons drawn ready to fight. My parents, Lord Feleo and Lady Amber; Pumar, our weapons master; Ocelotra, bold and outspoken; Fangelo, the first Sabretooth to hold the rank of Thundercat since Grune betrayed the Code of Thundera and was exiled into space . . . With a collective roar, they launched themselves at the Mutants and Lunatacs who had freed the being they had long hoped was consigned to the realms of history.

"So," Mumm-Ra said, smiling evilly as he looked down at the advancing army, "you choose to defy Mumm-Ra. Very well, it shall be the last mistake any of you ever make!" With that, he raised his arms, his hands crackling with magical energy. A ball of pure white energy formed in his hands, glowing and pulsing. Then, he took aim and hurled it in the direction of my fellow Thundercats; they barely managed to dodge it, but became scattered in the process.

However, they quickly regrouped and launched themselves at the Cult once more. I wished I could do something to help, but I was still a prisoner; my hands were tied behind my back and I was weaponless. Nonetheless, I felt I had to at least try to help, so, taking advantage of the fact that my legs were still free, I kicked out at the nearest Cult member, a Jackal Mutant, knocking him to the ground. The next thing I felt was a pat on my shoulder. "Good going, young Storm," I heard Pumar's voice say.

I managed to smile. "Thanks. Now, could you get these bonds off?"

"No problem." It only took Pumar a few seconds to cut through my bonds, allowing me to get into the battle. For only the second time in my young life, I felt my warrior's blood rising, knew the overwhelming urge to fight the forces of evil. But, as I prepared to charge into the fray, a thought occurred to me.

"What about the Cult's prisoners?" I asked, recalling how Koris, Jaya and I had tried, without success, to free them. Now, those innocents whom the Cult had made their prisoners and had, I now realised, planned to sacrifice as part of their diabolical plan to free Mumm-Ra were in danger of being caught in the crossfire. Someone would have to get them out of harm's way. But, the way things were going, it looked like that would be a tall order. Nonetheless, something had to be done; the Code of Thundera would not permit Thundercats to fight if it meant endangering the lives of innocents.

"You're right, Storm," Pumar agreed, as if sensing what I was thinking. "They're nearly all Wollos and Bolkins, beings not used to fighting." He caught the eye of three of Kayon's men and pointed to each of them in turn. "You, you and you, take the Cult's prisoners and try to get them clear of this spot."

Though what good that would do with Mumm-Ra freed and out for revenge was anybody's guess.

Mumm-Ra, meanwhile, was charging up to launch another of his energy blasts. Once more, the ball of pure white energy was forming in his hands, but this time it seemed to be getting bigger and bigger. Soon, it was so big that I needed no-one to tell me that, if it was launched, it could wipe out every living thing in range - unless it could somehow be stopped. And the only one present who might have the means of doing so was my father, the current bearer of the Sword of Omens; the mystic blade just might have the power to deflect Mumm-Ra's energy blast and send it right back at him.

But my father was currently occupied with fighting a trio of Reptilian Mutants, including Lizarius, and did not seem to have noticed the greater threat of Mumm-Ra. I had to warn him, but, even as I turned and headed in his direction, Mumm-Ra prepared to launch his energy blast. And, as I had no Cheetah blood in me, there was no way I would be able to reach my father in time.

It was all over.