

Storm of Thundera

By Clare

Chapter 17

I struggled to take in Icelia's words, though I knew deep down that they were true. On the other hand, part of me couldn't help but wonder. Was Third Earth really finished? Had this planet truly been transformed into Fourth Earth when all that energy was unleashed? I did not know, but one thing seemed certain; Mumm-Ra had triumphed. I did not want it to be so, but the bleak and barren landscape spoke for itself. Had it all been for nothing? Had I fought to protect the fragment of Statue which Wilykit had given me, only for the Thundercats' greatest enemy to win through in the end?

I was just pondering that bleak scenario when Icelia called out again. "Storm, get out of here! Take the Warrior Maiden and run!"

"Not a chance!" I told her. If she thought I was going to run away while she took on Mumm-Ra in a fight she couldn't hope to win, she didn't know me very well. The blood of Lord Lion-O flowed in my veins, as did that of generations of Thundercat Lords. We were sworn to fight evil, to ensure that the forces which Mumm-Ra represented were never allowed to gain too great a hold. Whether this planet was called Third Earth or Fourth Earth, we Thundercats were pledged to protect it. And that meant Mumm-Ra must once more be vanquished, a task which it was only fitting should fall to someone who had been born to Lion-O's line.

As Mumm-Ra raised his hands to attack, I bravely stood my ground, telling myself that, no matter what happened to me, I was acting in the name of Justice, Truth, Honour and Loyalty. The four main tenets of the Code of Thundera, the laws by which every Lord of the Thundercats had ruled since time immemorial . . . I thought back to the day, as a nine-year-old in trouble for not paying attention at school, I had repeated those words parrot-fashion with no real understanding of what they meant. Now, following everything that had happened lately, I had gained that understanding and I was determined to live, or die, by those principles.

A sudden blast of ice forced me to duck. I looked up to see Icelia standing there, a look of grim determination on her face as she faced off against Mumm-Ra. This wasn't right; she was a Lunatac, one of a race which had been allied with Mumm-Ra in the old days, and here she was fighting against him. I recalled the first time she had contacted me and shown me her fragment of the Statue of Omens. At the time, I wondered if it was a clever bluff, but now . . .

"Storm, I told you to get out of here!" Icelia shouted, dodging out of the way as Mumm-Ra attempted to blast her.

"Not until you explain a few things - like why you're fighting on our side." As far as I was concerned, Icelia still couldn't be entirely trusted; she was a Lunatac, after all, and I'd been taught all my life that Lunatacs were trouble. For one thing, the story she'd once told me about her people breaking their alliance with the Mutants sounded a little too contrived. How did I know she hadn't rehearsed the whole thing beforehand?

But, even as I was getting ready to stand my ground, Mumm-Ra raised his arms and blasted Icelia with all his energy at once. For a moment, she levitated into the air and hovered there, her body glowing as it had been lit from within. Then, as I looked on in horror, she fell to the ground and lay still.

At this point, I expected Mumm-Ra to turn on me. But I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of seeing me cower before him, so I stood with my back straight and prepared to face him down. That, after all, was what Lion-O would have done and I was a member of the same noble line of Thundercats.

But the attack never came. Instead, I heard an unearthly scream, the sort of scream that can't really be described, except to say that it goes right through you. It took me a moment to realise that it was Mumm-Ra who had screamed, though perhaps it shouldn't have because he was the only being present who was capable of making such a sound. Then, as I watched, his body suddenly began to flicker, then slowly fade away. A look of utter horror crossed his evil face as he looked down at his hands and realised he could see straight through them.

"No!" he cried. "What is this?! What's happening to me?!"

"The Statue of Omens . . ." I looked around and saw that Icelia was struggling to sit up. Forgetting all the doubts I had had regarding whether I could ever trust her, I hurried to her side. "When the Cult summoned you, released you from your . . . imprisonment, they did not have all the . . . pieces." She reached into her pocket and pulled out a piece of marble, which she held out to me. I examined it - the shape suggested an arm bent at the elbow. It was the same fragment of statue which she had shown me before.

"This," she said. "This has been your undoing, Mumm-Ra. You thought all the fragments had been . . . destroyed, that you could now enter this realm freely. But, as long as a single fragment . . . exists, you can never truly escape your . . . banishment."

I looked from Icelia to the fading Mumm-Ra, then back again. Finally, a lot of things were beginning to make sense, including why a fragment of the Statue had been given to a Lunatac. The police officer who gave Icelia her piece must have foreseen this eventuality, realised there might come a time when someone, perhaps in a misguided quest for power, would attempt to free Mumm-Ra. And, if all the fragments had to be destroyed in order to achieve that objective, all that needed to be done to prevent it was to make sure at least one fragment was not destroyed. The unknown officer must have known the Cult would never suspect a Lunatac, even one whose race was supposedly no longer allied with Plundarr, of possessing a piece.

Meanwhile, Mumm-Ra seemed to be struggling against the force which was causing him to fade. Sometimes, he would become almost solid again, but it never lasted for more than a few seconds. "I shall escape this!" he ranted. "I, Mumm-Ra, ever-living source of evil, cannot be defeated!"

"But you have been . . . defeated," Icelia told him. "You defeated yourself when you . . . attacked me."

"What are you talking about?!"

Icelia smiled at him, an enigmatic smile, the sort of smile which means the person who's smiling know something the rest of us don't. "The Statue was more than . . . just a statue. There was an . . . enchantment on the pieces to ensure that, should you . . . somehow be freed even without the . . . destruction of all the . . . fragments, you would be . . . banished once more the moment the bearer of the last . . . piece died. And, you, Mumm-Ra, have just . . . brought about your own . . . exile . . ."

On the word "exile", Icelia slumped to the ground and lay motionless. At the same instant, I heard Mumm-Ra give a final, agonised cry and looked up just in time to see him fade out of view, leaving no sign that he had ever been present. No sign, that is, except the bleak grey landscape that had once been a thriving planet and the Ice Lunatac who lay at my feet. I looked down at Icelia, my mind filled with so many questions I wished I could ask her, questions which she would now never be able to answer.

I presently became aware of movement behind me and looked round. Jaya, despite her injured ankle, had crawled over to me and knelt beside me as we both looked at Icelia, lying there with her eyes staring blankly up at us. Eyes which no longer saw anything . . .

"Is she dead?" Jaya whispered, not taking her eyes off the fallen Lunatac.

I leaned over Icelia's chest and confirmed what I knew already. "Yes," I said, feeling a strange sense of disquiet as I spoke. It wasn't grief, at least not the sort of grief I had felt when Wilykit died, more a sense that Icelia needn't have died, if I had only trusted her from the beginning. Perhaps, we could have worked together, found some means of vanquishing Mumm-Ra that wouldn't involve any loss of life. But maybe there was no other way. Maybe Icelia had known all along that this was the only way Mumm-Ra could be defeated. "I think she sacrificed herself," I added, "to send Mumm-Ra back into exile." I slowly reached forward and closed Icelia's eyelids.

I don't know how long Jaya and I stayed there, kneeling beside a dead Lunatac. All I can say is that it felt weird, like something which went against the natural order of things. All my life, I had been brought up to regard the Mutants and Lunatacs as enemies, but I had just seen a Lunatac give her life to bring about the defeat of the Thundercats' deadliest enemy. I still didn't know if Icelia had truly been on our side, and it was unlikely I would ever find out, but at least I could be sure that she hadn't been on the Cult's side. So maybe there was some truth in the story she'd told about the Ice Lunatacs breaking away from Plundarr.

"There were so many questions I could have asked her," I murmured, reaching out to stroke Icelia's hair. "And now she can't answer them."

Jaya continued to look down at the body of the being we had, until only a few moments ago, regarded as a potential enemy. "She must have planned this all along."

"She did." Jaya and I looked around to see the astral form of Wilykit standing there, looking down at Icelia. "And, in doing so, she demonstrated a very rare courage. You see, Storm, courage is not just about being able to handle weapons or fight beings like Mumm-Ra. It means doing what must be done, no matter what the cost, even if that cost is your own life."

Jaya stared open-mouthed at the ghostly form of the Thundercat who had once been my friend and confidante. "Wow! Where'd you learn all that stuff?"

Wilykit smiled, just as she used to when she was alive and Hunter and I were bombarding her with questions. "I lived a long life, young Warrior Maiden," she replied simply. "A life long enough to gain much wisdom. And old Jaga said much the same thing when I was a child." With that, she vanished, leaving Jaya and myself kneeling beside Icelia, a Lunatac who had made the ultimate sacrifice.

And that was where a patrol from the Refuge found us. I don't know how long we had been there, only that we couldn't move because of Jaya's ankle, besides which we did not know what sort of perils this world now called Fourth Earth held. Fourth Earth . . . I recalled being told the story of how cataclysmic events had all but destroyed this planet on two previous occasions by the time the Thundercats landed here. In fact, the event which led to this becoming Third Earth had been so violent that virtually no trace of Second Earth remained. And now a third cataclysm had transformed this world into Fourth Earth.

Anyway, Jaya and I were still kneeling beside Icelia when we heard a noise. Instinctively, I jumped to my feet, forgetting that I was unarmed, but I found myself smiling with relief when my father came running towards us, followed by Kayon and Queen Tia. A dozen or so others, including Ocelotra and Pumar from among the Thundercats, followed them. "Storm, are you and Jaya all right?" my father asked the moment he drew level with us. "We were worried when you didn't report back. So I looked through the Eye of Thundera and . . ." He paused, noticing Icelia's body for the first time. "What's going on here?" He had obviously only seen part of what was happening.

I explained as much as I could, telling him how Jaya had stumbled and twisted her ankle, how I had tried to shield her from the Doomsday Birds, how Icelia had unexpectedly come to our rescue, how she and Mumm-Ra had fought . . . "And, then, when he killed her," I said, "something happened which sent him back where he came from. I don't know what it was, but it had something to do with her having one final piece of the Statue."

"Precisely, Storm," said Tia, stepping forward to join my father. "The Cult of Mumm-Ra were ignorant of one very important fact. When the Statue of Omens was broken and its pieces divided, a spell was cast to ensure that, should Mumm-Ra somehow be released, he could never truly be free as long as there was at least one fragment of the Statue in existence. By destroying

the pieces they stole, the Cult weakened the enchantments which kept Mumm-Ra imprisoned just enough for them to bring him through into our realm. But they did not know that one of the fragments was missing."

She did not need to tell me that the final fragment had been the one which Icelia had carried with her. I knew this already, but Tia seemed to be forgetting one thing. "Wait a moment," I said. "Koris still had his piece when he was evacuated. And the spell was only supposed to work when the bearer of the last fragment died."

"Actually," Kayon cut in, "the Wollo and I agreed before he and the others left that he would jettison the piece as soon as the Feliner III passed a black hole." He did not need to elaborate; I already knew that a black hole was a point in space where gravity was so intense that nothing could escape, not even light. Provided you don't get too close, they come in handy if you want to dispose of anything. Such as a piece of the Statue of Omens . . .

So Icelia's fragment had indeed been the last. And, when she died, the enchantment on it meant Mumm-Ra was instantly sent back into exile, back to the place which could only be accessed via the Book of Omens. And, after everything that had happened, I could be certain that steps would be taken to make sure that, this time, he stayed exiled. "Is it over, then?" I heard myself asking.

"Yes, Storm," replied my father. Then, he looked down at Icelia with a frown on his face. "I never thought I'd see the day a Lunatac saved a Thundercat. Still . . ." He walked over to Jaya and picked her up in his arms. "Come on, we've got a planet to rebuild. And someone needs to contact the rest of the Thundercats to let them know we're all safe."

With Mumm-Ra safely back in exile, the task of helping Fourth Earth to emerge from the ruins of Third Earth could begin. Over the next few days, we sent regular patrols out to assess the damage and find out what had become of those inhabitants of the planet who had not been part of our alliance. In the process, we learned that the Snowmen of Hook Mountain had been completely wiped out, the Tuska warriors reduced to a handful. However, the unicorns and their two elf-like Keepers had all survived, protected by some ancient magic. But most other races had suffered at least some losses and the survivors were struggling to rebuild their lives amid the ruins of what had once been a thriving planet.

Lynxari and the two galactic police officers who had been overseeing the evacuation of the non-combatants brought the Wollo, Berbils, Bolkins and Brutemen back to the planet. I can't say "back to Third Earth" because this wasn't Third Earth anymore, though it had been Third Earth when they left, so saying "back to Fourth Earth" doesn't make sense either. Anyway, those simple folk were brought back to the ruins of the planet which had been home to all of them, a planet we must now rebuild. With that in mind, it was agreed that the Thundercats who were already on Fourth Earth should stay and help with the rebuilding, leaving Leopardo in charge of things on New Thundera.

The last fragment of the Statue presented its own problem. It was the only thing keeping Mumm-Ra imprisoned and we could not risk it being destroyed, even accidentally, lest it cause a repeat of recent events. In the end, we had to bury it, deep in the ground where it could not be disturbed, though we took the precaution of marking the spot with a pillar to warn people of what was buried there. Hopefully, that would deter anyone from digging in that spot, at least anyone who wasn't insane enough to want Mumm-Ra back, though there wasn't much risk of that right now. The location, meanwhile, became known as the Forbidden Spot.

Late one afternoon, I was standing with Koris and Jaya, the latter's ankle now fully recovered, talking about recent events. Most of the landscape around us was still grey and bleak, but we had already start to notice green shoots appearing, giving us all hope that this planet was beginning to recover from the cataclysm. It was too early to tell what sort of planet Fourth Earth would be, but we all knew it would be very different from its three previous incarnations.

"What sort of world do you think this will be?" Jaya asked at length.

"I don't know," I told her. Nor did anyone else on Fourth Earth, for that matter; all we did know was that we must build this whole planet up from scratch. Not an easy task, but, if we all worked together, I had no doubt that we could achieve a great deal. And the Thundercats would do it all in the name of Justice, Truth, Honour and Loyalty.

I turned and gazed at the sun as it sunk below the horizon to mark the end of another day on Fourth Earth, a planet for which this was only the beginning.