

## **Storm of Thundera**

By Clare

Chapter 3

Deep down, I had always known it was bound to happen some time; after all, no living thing could last forever. But it still came as a shock when I saw Wilykit's image fading from the Chain. I think we had all grown so used to having her around, the last surviving link with Lion-O's era, that we somehow assumed she would go on forever . . .

But she wouldn't. After a long and eventful life, the oldest of the Thundercats was dying.

We all sat in Cats' Lair, waiting for the inevitable, our eyes constantly fixed on the fading image on the Chain of Loyalty. I had asked Lynxari what was wrong with Wilykit, only to be met with a shrug and a shaken head. Old age, the Lynx woman said, something which came to all of us eventually. She had, I later learned, found Wilykit collapsed in her quarters, apparently very disorientated and struggling in vain to get to her feet. That was when Lynxari "lost it" and dropped that tray; she had instinctively feared the worst and the fact that Wilykit's image was fading from the Chain confirmed it.

"What else is gonna happen?" I wondered, watching my father pacing up and down. I could see the tension on his face and realised that he too must be feeling the strain of the day's events. First there had been Thundranium released in the subway, then that attack on Third Earth, now this. It's not that I thought these events were tied in any way, but it seemed to me that our years of peace were coming to an end.

I glanced across at the other Thundercat children. Hunter was sitting opposite me, leafing through a book without really reading it, while Lata, Sita and Sylvia played quietly on the floor. I don't know if the three girls understood much of what was happening, but they seemed to sense the tension, the anticipation, and it made them less boisterous than usual. Normally, they would have been chattering away like a flock of birds, but, today, they just sat with their dolls on their laps and hardly said a word between them.

"Storm?"

I turned round at the sound of Snarf Emala's voice and saw her waddling towards me, dressed in her customary cap and apron. Normally, I resented the sight of her, largely because of her constant nagging and fussing, which, if anything, had grown worse over the last few years. If I put one foot wrong, she would go on for hours about the "duty" and "responsibility" of being an heir apparant. Like many Snarfs, she could be extremely fussy when the mood took her; therefore, I tried to avoid her whenever possible. Not that it was always easy . . .

Normally, I would have told her to go away - or at least ignored her. Today, however, I had a feeling I should listen to her. "What is it, Snarf Emala?" I asked, keeping my tone neutral.

"Wilykit wants to see you," she replied. "Best go to her before it's too late."

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Sensing the importance of Snarf Emala's request, I decided to do as she told me for once and headed up to Wilykit's quarters. I entered to find her reclining on her couch with my mother and Ocelotra at her side, a serene expression on her old face. She looked up as I stood in the doorway, her red eyes showing a sparkle that belied her evidently very weak condition. "Storm," she said in a voice that was little more than a whispered croak, "come . . . closer."

I walked forward slowly, my gaze fixed on the trio of female Thundercats - Ocelotra with her intricately marked hair; my mother, Lady Amber, with the flame red hair of the Lions and Wilykit, oldest of the Thundercats and the last remaining link with Lion-O's time, with her snow white hair. The latter feebly raised her left hand and beckoned to me. I was shocked by how frail she had become in just a few hours, how much the gaunt spectre of death had taken her over; even though she had been elderly when I was born, she had never been this weak . . .

"Hurry . . . Storm!" she called in her croaky whisper.

For all her frailty, her tone conveyed urgency. So I hurried, my heart hammering as I wondered why I had been summoned to an old woman's deathbed. I wasn't related to her; Wilykit had had a child many years ago, a son named Nero, but he died in a tragic accident when he was just sixteen years old. She had spoken of him more than once, said I reminded her of him a little, but there were no pictures of him in Cats' Lair so I couldn't say if that was true or not. No, Wilykit had no living relatives; she was the last of her family's line, her twin brother having died childless.

Anyway, as I knelt at her side, Wilykit reached forward and ran her hand through my hair. "Storm," she whispered, "you, Hunter, Lata, Sita, Sylvia and Tigon are the . . . grandchildren I never had. And, as the eldest, you must be the one to . . . inherit my greatest . . . treasure."

I looked at her, wondering if she might be rambling in her confusion. This was the first time I'd heard anything about her owning treasure of any sort. Besides, what sort of treasure belonging to an old woman would interest a fourteen-year-old boy like me? I was about to ask her what she meant, but she answered my question for me.

"When your great-grandfather defeated . . . Mumm-Ra, we all wanted to . . . make sure there was no way he could be freed, even if . . . the Book of Omens and the . . . Key of . . . Thundera were . . . destroyed. So we . . . created a fifteenth Treasure of . . . Thundera, one which would ensure Mumm-Ra was imprisoned in the . . . Book for eternity . . ."

So there was another Treasure of Thundera. Those that were recovered in Lion-O's day were known to all on New Thundera; it was even said that some of them had helped save our world when it seemed it was going to be destroyed once again. The Book, however, was potentially dangerous; even though you could only access its deepest secrets with the aid of the Key of Thundera, such a defence would be little help if anyone ever sought to destroy the Book and release Mumm-Ra. That was why it was kept under such tight security. That was why we kept it locked in a vault which only my mother had access to. I suddenly recalled what Wilykit had told

me five years earlier: "We will never let it happen." Of course, she was talking about the Book getting into the wrong hands . . .

Anyway, as I looked at Wilykit, she feebly reached under her robes and removed a brown leather pouch, which she handed to me. I was a little disappointed - was this the fifteenth and newest piece of the Treasure of Thundera? A simple leather pouch? "What's . . .?" I started to ask, before she cut me off.

"Never . . . judge by . . . appearances. That is the . . . most important . . . lesson for a . . . Thundercat Lord. It's what's . . . inside . . . that's . . . that's . . ."

"That's what?" I demanded after she had failed to complete her sentence for several seconds. But, as I looked at the old woman lying there with her eyes closed, her breathing becoming increasingly laboured, I knew she would never reply.

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Just after midnight, Wilykit's long life finally came to an end. I was sitting beside her, still half-awake, when she gave a faint sigh as her chest fell for the last time. It took a moment for the truth to register, that I would never again hear her tell her stories of the past, that the last link with Lion-O's time was gone. Even then, I did not want to believe it . . .

"Wilykit?" I whispered, leaning across and shaking her. But there was no response; she just lay there serenely, almost like she was sleeping. Which she was, in a way, only this was a sleep from which there would be no awakening . . . Nonetheless, I wasn't about to let her go just yet. "Wilykit?" I called again, shaking her harder. It was at that moment my mother appeared at my side.

"Storm," she said gently, resting her hand on my shoulder, "it's all over." She held out the Chain of Loyalty for me to see and the first thing I noticed was that there was a blank disc where Wilykit's picture used to be. I stared at it mutely. So it was all over; Wilykit had passed into the mysterious realms of the Netherworld. I shook my head, wanting to banish the truth that was staring me in the face and, when that didn't work, I did something I hadn't done since I was about five or six.

Forgetting that I was a future Thundercat Lord and had to maintain a brave face at all times, I threw my arms round my mother and pressed my face into her chest. Ordinarily, I would have been embarrassed to do something like this, partly because I felt I was acting like a small child, but mostly because involved coming into close physical contact with a female. At fourteen, I was a slightly awkward adolescent, still not entirely sure what the opposite sex was for, an awkwardness which even extended to my own mother. But, right now, I was too overwhelmed by grief to care.

I was only vaguely aware that my mother had wrapped her arms around me, holding me close like she used to when I was younger. We stood like that for several minutes, both of us lost in our thoughts and memories . . .

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The next day, I sat alone in my room, examining the contents of the mysterious pouch Wilykit had given me. This consisted of a small fragment of what looked like white alabaster, one which had clearly been broken from a much larger piece. But what did it mean? I recalled Wilykit's dying words, how she had told me never to judge by appearances, but, for the life of me, I couldn't see anything special about this broken lump of stone. Was this the fifteenth Treasure of Thundera? A piece of broken rock?

If I hadn't known better, I would have sworn Wilykit had gone senile in her old age. But she hadn't; she had maintained all her faculties right up until the end. That last word hit me with a violent jolt - Wilykit's life had ended and, with it, any chance of asking her what I desperately wanted to know. I examined the lump of rock, trying to figure out what it might be; I could see what might be the outline of toes, but it was hard to be sure. If only Wilykit had remained conscious a few minutes longer, just long enough for her to explain what this was all about . . .

I was still sitting there, staring at the rock and trying to figure out what it had to do with keeping Mumm-Ra from returning, when the door opened. "Storm?" It was Tigreta and she sounded concerned. I looked up to see her standing in the doorway, a pained expression etched on her face, her left hand placed over the Thundercat Insignia on her tunic. Her eyes were rimmed with red.

"Yes, Tigreta," I said, my voice barely audible.

"Storm," she said again, dabbing at her eyes, "your father wants you. All the Thundercats must be there for . . ." She paused. " . . . for Wilykit's Lying in State." It was those words more than anything that brought it home to me. Lying in State was a traditional practice whenever a Thundercat died; their body would be dressed in their finest clothes and laid out on a catafalque for a few days before being laid to rest. The traditional period was seven days for males and five days for females. I had never witnessed this ritual, being too young to remember the last time a Thundercat died, and I wasn't entirely sure what to expect.

Anyway, I heaved a sigh and followed Tigreta downstairs to where the other Thundercats were waiting around a simple wooden table. The first thing I noticed was that a gap had been left as a mark of respect for Wilykit; it reminded me of the gap that now existed in all our lives, of the loss of our last link with Old Thundera. I blinked back my tears and walked to my traditional place beside my parents.

At a signal from my father, my mother banged a gong immediately behind her and four Thunderians emerged from the next room, bearing Wilykit's body on a bier. With perfect coordination, they carried her to the table and placed her on it, allowing me my first change to get a good look at a dead body. It was a bit disappointing at first sight; all I could see was what looked like the sleeping face of an old woman, her lined cheeks serene, her hands clasped on her chest. But there was an unnatural stillness about her, a stillness that reminded me of the piece of alabaster she had given to me . . .

I was jolted out of my thoughts by the sound of my father's voice. "My fellow Thundercats," he was saying, "our comrade, Wilykit, has passed into the Netherworld. Her mortal life was long, but, as with all things, it has proved finite." My mother placed a candelabra containing nine red candles, one for each decade of Wilykit's life, at the head of the old woman. Then, my father continued. "Felis, now that you are the oldest of us, would you please do the honours?"

With solemn ceremony, Felis stepped forward with a lighted taper in his hand. A spritely seventy-year-old Snow Leopard, he had been a Thundercat for over forty years, having been the last one annointed by Lion-O himself. In recent years, Wilykit had been advising him on the role of an elder and he had come to regard her as a close friend. Now, with her gone, he was the eldest of the Thundercats and it was his duty to light the candles in the candelabra at her head. I watched as he touched the wick of each candle with the lighted taper, waiting until it caught and watching as each flame grew. Soon, Wilykit's head looked as though it was surrounded by a halo of fire, a fire which would be kept burning for the next five days.

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Even in the midst of grief, life still went on and, the very next day, my parents departed for Third Earth, along with Pumar, Ocelotra, Fangelo and Lynxari. I watched them go, all thoughts of stowing away on board the Feliner III forgotten as I reflected on recent events. I had been entrusted with something I still didn't understand, but that would have to wait. Right now, those Thundercats who had remained on New Thundera had a funeral to organise.

Since I was not yet of age and both my parents were absent, Leopardo was the one who assumed command. He was the one who ordered the building of a mausoleum for Wilykit, a large tomb where she could rest for all eternity. Made out of white marble, it was set on the slope of a hill overlooking our city, allowing her to watch over us even if she was no longer physically with us. Leopardo also delegated tasks to the other adult Thundercats. Lynxon and Katron were given the job of looking after the tributes flooding in from all over New Thundera, while Felis had the task of writing the eulogy. Meanwhile, Tigreta and Snarf Emala were keeping an eye on myself and the rest of the kids, in theory at least. In practice, I tried to give them the slip whenever I could and so did Hunter.

Again and again, we looked at the piece of rock, trying to figure out what it meant. But we had no clues, no hint that could point us in the right direction; all we had to go on was what Wilykit had told us about it being a fifteenth Treasure of Thundera. But that failed to explain how it was supposed to keep Mumm-Ra in check and it looked as though Wilykit was taking that secret to the grave - literally. If only she could have hung on longer, I might know what I was dealing with. I even found myself wishing she could become my spirit guide the way Jaga had once been Lion-O's.

On the day of the funeral itself, I assembled with the rest of the Thundercats in front of a vast crowd of Thunderians. I paid scant attention as Wilykit's body, draped in a cloth bearing the Thundercat Insignia, was brought out and laid before the crowd. Nor did I take much notice as Felis made his speech, although I did catch some stuff about her being the "mother of Thundera" and her "wisdom and compassion". All that meant little to me; all I wanted was for our dead

elder to be placed in her tomb so that we could carry on with our lives. Not meaning any disrespect, but funerals bored me stupid.

Then, just as Wilykit was about to be laid to rest, a sudden noise made us all look up. Three Mutant craft were circling above our heads, each one piloted by an ugly-looking Reptilian. I recognised them as Skycutters from a picture I had seen once and found myself smiling; the design of those things hadn't changed in over eighty years. But what was going on here? Why had those Reptilians dared come here now of all times? Before I could ask myself any more questions, three lots of laser fire blasted into the crowd . . .

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Mass confusion erupted. Many of the Thunderians present flung themselves to the ground in a bid to avoid the lasers, while others, incensed at this intrusion, started shouting abuse at the offending Mutants.

"You slimy freaks!" Tigreta shouted from where she was trying to shield Lata, Sita, Sylvia and Tighn, all of whom were wailing with fright. "Have you no respect?!"

"This is a funeral!" yelled a middle-aged Cheetah woman in the front row.

"Go back where you came from, you overgrown lizards!" snarled Lynxon. I could see he was itching to give the Reptilians a good thrashing if they dared to come any closer. At twenty-one, he was the youngest of the adult Thundercats, but he was already deadly with his morningstar . . .

At this, one of the Reptilians brought his Skycutter in closer, near enough for me to see him clearly. He was a hideous creature by Thunderian standards, his body covered in thick grey-green scales, his head flattened with fangs protruding over his lower lip, his neck so short that he seemed not to have one at all. A powerful tail with ridges down the back of it grew out of his backside and he wore no clothing except a ragged grey loincloth. It was my first sight of a living Mutant and I found myself staring at him with revolted fascination.

Then, he spoke and I heard for the first time the sibilant hiss of Reptilian speech.

"Thunderiansssss, heed my wordsssss! I, Lizariussssss, come to you with an ultimatum. You will sssssssurrender the fragment of the ssssstatue or you will all be dessssstroyed! Every male, female and cub!"