

Storm of Thundera

By Clare

Chapter 4

The entire scene had erupted into mass confusion, all thoughts of the fact that we were supposed to be laying the oldest of the Thundercats to rest forgotten. Lizarius' words had struck fear into the hearts of everyone present, reminded us of stories we had heard as children. Those stories told of the old days when the Thunderians and the Mutants were still at war; it was said that the Mutants lived only to conquer and had long tried to subdue the people of Thundera. Thanks to the might of the Thundercats (and the Mutants' own incompetence) these attempted conquests had never succeeded. But that was not what concerned us right now; the demand Lizarius had made was.

Leopardo stepped forward and addressed Lizarius, trying his hardest not to show his contempt for the Reptilian. "My good Mutant," he said, prompting a few smiles. No Mutant was ever referred to as "good" on New Thundera; the mutual dislike our races shared still existed even now. "I fear we cannot do as you have asked because we do not know which fragment you refer to."

Lizarius' only response was an angry hiss, as he bared his sharp teeth. "The fragment of the Sssstatue, you fool!" he snarled. "The Sssssssstatue fashioned to keep the mighty Mumm-Ra imprisoned. We know it isssssss on New Thundera - now hand it over!" As if to prove he wasn't bluffing, Lizarius turned his Sky-Cutter round and pointed its gun directly at Tigreta and the children. "Or I will blsssssst thessssse bratssssss!"

I could see Leopardo was struggling with his dilemma, his forehead knotted with conflicting options, neither of which were very pleasant. If he handed this fragment of statue over to Lizarius, it could well mean the return of Mumm-Ra, a being long banished to the realms of history, a being who was little more than a demon of the past. If he returned, there was no telling what dreadful revenge he would wreak upon our people for imprisoning him. And yet, if Leopardo did not do as Lizarius ordered, Lata, Sita, Sylvia and Tigon were doomed - before they had seen anything of life. To Thunderians, there are few abominations worse than harming a child.

"All right, we'll do it."

Leopardo's voice was flat and carried the defeated tone of one forced to do something they don't want to do but left with no alternative but to do something far worse. "We'll hand the fragment over. Even for the sake of keeping Mumm-Ra at bay, we cannot sacrifice children." I had never seen the powerful Leopard Thunderian like this before; he was usually one of our bravest warriors, proud to serve as a Thundercat. And he had just given in to a Mutant's demands for the sake of four small children - he hadn't even tried to put up a fight.

Already, I could hear murmurings of discontent.

"Selling out on us!"

"Traitor!"

"He should be stripped of his title!"

"No Thundercat would have done that in Lion-O's day!"

The last remark came from a female Thunderian a little younger than the recently deceased Wilykit. I had never seen her before, but she was obviously a mixed breed; her facial markings were the same as those found on Cheetahs, but her hair was plain. It was hard to tell what the other half of her heritage might be and I was soon distracted out of any speculation I might have done by Tigreta's response to the old woman's words.

"And no Thundercat would allow a child to come to harm!" she said coldly. "You know Leopardo better than that, Leah. He wouldn't do this if had any choice in the matter." She drew the four children close to her. "Take a good look. Ask yourself what sacrifices you would make to keep these cubs safe."

Leah looked as though she was about to reply, but, before she could do so, Lizarius spoke again. "Very well. You have one hour to sssssurrender the fragment - or you will sssssssuffer!" With that, he and his fellow Mutants took off in their Sky-cutters and disappeared from view. "We'll be back, Thunderiansssssss!" was his parting shot.

As soon as Wilykit was safely in her tomb, we headed straight back to Cats' Lair, all of us shaken by this new development. As soon as we got back, I went to my room and took out the fragment of stone Wilykit had given me. It certainly looked as though it could be part of a statue, but was it part of the statue Lizarius had mentioned? And, if so, where were the other pieces? And did this have anything to do with the strange events of the last few days?

I was still pondering that when Katron and Leopardo walked in. "This is it, isn't it?" I said flatly, holding up the chunk of rock. "This is what the Mutants want."

Both Thundercats nodded in unison. "But we're not going to let them get it," added Katron, who was carrying something concealed in a dark blue cloth. "We always knew something like this might happen, so we prepared for it." He whipped the cloth away to reveal a piece of stone identical in every respect to the one I was holding. "A plaster imitation," he explained. "We'll give it to Lizarius and he'll be fooled into thinking it's the real thing and leave us alone."

"Meanwhile, the real fragment will be far away . . ." added Leopardo, directing a conspiratorial wink in my direction.

The arrangements for my escape were made hurriedly; there wasn't much time for me to get clear of New Thundera before Lizarius' deadline expired. So, with the fragment of stone in my backpack, I was bundled into the Thundershuttle, a small spacecraft which Leopardo had designed. Unlike the Feliner craft, which had been around since Lion-O's day, this was not a large ship; it could carry two people in some comfort, five with a little squeezing. But, with the Feliner III gone, it was the fastest craft we had - and the only one capable of travelling in interstellar space.

Leopardo gave me a few last-minute pointers before I was blasted off. "OK, Storm, I've set this thing to autopilot, so you won't have too much to worry about. But, if you get into difficulties, that . . ." He indicated a button on the control panel. " . . . is the manual over-ride. Only use it in an emergency, OK?"

I nodded, still barely able to contain my excitement at the thought of going on my first real mission. I had no idea what was going to happen to me, no idea what I would encounter, but, with my fourteen-year-old self-confidence, I was sure I could handle it. After all, I was a Thundercat - and a future Lord of the Thundercats at that. My only regret was that Hunter, my friend since early childhood, could not come along, but Leopardo and Pumar had decided he was still too young. There would be other missions for him, they said, other chances for him to fight for the Code of Thundera.

I was startled out of my thoughts by a robotic voice saying: "*Blast off in twenty seconds. Please fasten your safety belt and make sure the airlock is secure.*" This was it; I was about to leave New Thundera for the first time in my life. I quickly strapped myself into my seat and scanned the control panel to confirm that the words **Airlock sealed** had lit up. Then, I felt the craft vibrating beneath me as it took off into the sky, a chill of excitement enveloping me as I exited New Thundera's atmosphere.

I examined the fragment of statue, wondering as I did so who it was meant to represent and hoping Leopardo and Pumar's ruse would work. If it didn't, if the Mutants continued to pursue the real fragment, there was no telling where this would end.

It did not take long for New Thundera to completely disappear from view as I exited our solar system. As the planet of my birth faded from view, I couldn't help thinking of those who had fled Old Thundera before it was destroyed. How had they felt leaving their home planet behind? Especially since they believed they could never return, that their world was soon to be torn to pieces . . . I would never fully understand; there were few living Thunderians who did.

But one thing I did know was that I must find out the secret of this fragment of statue. Wilykit had said it was a powerful artefact, possibly the only thing that could vanquish Mumm-Ra once and for all should he somehow be freed from the Book of Omens. I did not know why, but some

instinct told me that there was a purpose to all this - the release of Thundranium on the subway, the crisis on Third Earth . . . somehow (don't ask me how) I knew the two things were connected.

But that would have to wait - right now, I was alone in space, on a mission I still didn't fully understand. And, with the craft set to autopilot, I had no control over where I went. All I could do was put my trust in Leopardo and his skill with machines. All I could do was hope my fellow Thundercats could deal with the crises which had landed me in this, which had forced me to embark on this journey into the unknown . . .

Suddenly, I was startled out of my thoughts by something on the viewscreen. That something was another spacecraft, but it was too far away for me to see whose it was and the viewscreens on the Thundershuttle had no zoom facility, preventing me from getting a closer look. What spacecraft was this? And who did it belong to? There was only one way to find out - I had to try and contact whoever was on board. But what if they were an enemy?

There was only one way to find out. My hand trembling slightly, I pressed the switch which activated the Thundershuttle's radio.

"Er . . ." I hesitated, unsure what the protocols for contacting unidentified spacecraft were. "Unknown craft, this is the Thundershuttle and I am a Thundercat! Identify yourself or I'll blast you out of the sky!"

There was a pause, followed by a female voice over the radio. "Hah! I'd like to see a kid like you try, even if you are a Thundercat!" Her tone sounded scornful, but I still couldn't tell who she was or even what race she belonged to, only that her accent was wrong for a Thunderian.

"Less of the "kid" stuff!" I shot back. "And who are you anyway?"

"Don't you know me?" This time, there was an edge of surprise in her voice. "Well, I'll tell you - I am Icelia, daughter of Lord Froston! An Ice Clan Lunatac!"

I digested her words in silence - so this was what a Lunatac sounded like. I had never seen one in the flesh, but I had been told about them and I had seen pictures. From what I'd heard, I knew a group of them had been allied with Mumm-Ra back in Lion-O's day, but that was decades ago, before this Ice Lunatac was even born. But could I trust her? After all, I'd been warned all my life that Lunatacs were (or had been) an enemy of Thunderians . . .

"Shocked you, have I?" Icelia's voice came through again. "To be honest, I never thought I'd end up talking to a Thundercat," she laughed.

"Just what is it you want?!" I demanded, realising she was doing everything she could to stall for time. "And what are you doing so close to New Thundera's solar system?"

"I came to see Lord Feleo," Icelia replied simply, "on a matter of some urgency."

"Well, you're too late - he's taken a delegation to Third Earth." I was still a little suspicious of Icelia's motives and couldn't help wondering why she wanted to see my father. Was she somehow mixed up in what had been going on lately? Did she know anything about the crisis on Third Earth which my father and the others were investigating? I guessed not - otherwise she would have known he was not on New Thundera. But that still didn't mean I could trust her . . .

"Look," Icelia said after a few minutes during which I debated with myself over whether or not I could trust her, "I know you probably don't trust me and, frankly, I don't blame you. But there's something you need to see . . ."

Suddenly, the viewscreen flickered and the vast expanse of stars was replaced by the image of a woman with ice-blue skin and shimmering white hair. Her eyes were a deep golden colour and, on her forehead, there was a small crescent-shaped mark as well as two tiny horns. She wore a dark green gown, with a gold circlet round her neck and a gold armband on her left arm. And she was young - I judged her to be in her early twenties at the most, making her around the same age as Lynxari.

She held something up in her hands and I did a double take - it was a fragment of alabaster the exact same colour as mine! Hers was slightly rounded, like an arm bent at the elbow. The mystery of Wilykit's legacy to me deepened in that instant. Was the fragment Icelia held also part of the statue Lizarius had mentioned? And, if so, how had it come to be in the possession of a Lunatac?

"Where did you get that?" I demanded, examining my own fragment.

"It was given to me," Icelia replied simply. "By an elder of my people - he told me to bring it to New Thundera, to the Thundercats . . ." Her voice trailed off and I wondered once again just where all this was leading. Even though I had been born long after the war between the Thundercats and the Mutants and Lunatacs ended, I still harboured a deep-seated mistrust of the two races.

"What for?" My tone was sharp.

"Because . . ." Icelia paused for a moment. "Because the Mutants are looking for it."

"Why should that bother you? I thought you were on the same side as those slimeballs." As I spoke, I felt a pang of disgust at the mere thought of Mutants, the old enemies of my people, and images of Lizarius's cruel face played in my mind. What would he do when he found out Pumar and Leopardo had tricked him? And why did he want that fragment of statue to begin with?

"Not anymore," Icelia replied. "Not since what happened on the Ice Moon . . ."