

Storm of Thundera

By Clare

Chapter 7

As the klaxon continued to blare, the sound piercing through me, I hurried into the corridor to see what had caused the alarm. From somewhere in the distance, I could hear the sounds of battle, shouting and cursing intermingled with the clashing of weapons. Well, I certainly wasn't going to miss this! If the Thundercats were involved in a fight, I meant to get in on the action.

"Lynxari! Look out!" I heard my mother shout from further down the corridor. There followed the sound of a throwing dagger zipping through the air, then a pained grunt as the dagger found its target. I hurried in the direction of the sound, arriving to find my mother and Lynxari standing before a fallen Jackal Mutant. The latter was a scrawny dog-like creature dressed in a brown loincloth. For some reason, Mutants only ever seemed to wear loincloths or tunics; some Thunderians said it was because they were "less civilised" than us.

Anyway, it looked as though this particular Mutant was out for the count. "Thanks, Amber," Lynxari was saying. I quickly pieced together what could have happened - the Jackal must have caught Lynxari by surprise, prompting my mother to use the throwing dagger she used for weaponry to bring him down. But how had he got into Cats' Lair? And were there any other Mutants around?

"What's going on?" I asked, drawing level with the two females.

They turned at the sound of my voice. "Storm, what are you doing here?" my mother asked. She walked over to retrieve her dagger, a five-inch steel blade with a large sapphire embedded in the hilt, from where it had fallen near the prone Jackal. "Anyway, we're under attack and you'd better get back to your room."

"No way!" I retorted, readying my chakram as I spoke. "I want to get in on the action!" It would, after all, be my duty as Lord of the Thundercats to fight in defence of the Code of Thundera and I was anxious to get some first hand experience of battle. Weapons training with Pumar and listening to tales of past battles was all very well, but there was no substitute for actually being involved in armed combat.

"Storm, don't argue," my mother told me firmly. "No matter how brave you may feel, you're still a child. And not only that, you're too important to the Thundercats for us to risk in . . ."

She was cut off abruptly as the Jackal on the floor suddenly leapt to his feet, having evidently been shamming injury, and grabbed Lynxari before she could resist, gripping her in a stranglehold. A surge of adrenalin shot through me and, the next thing I knew, I was charging at the Mutant with all my strength, determined to teach him a lesson. "Let her go!" I shouted, kicking the Jackal in the shins. He yelped and let go of Lynxari, as I made to follow through with my initial attack. Before I could do so, however, more Mutants burst into the room, weapons drawn ready to fight. I immediately recognised the Reptilian who seemed to be in charge -

Lizarius, the same Reptilian who had disrupted Wilykit's funeral and demanded the fragment of the Statue of Omens that had been entrusted to me.

"Sssso, Jacklon?" Lizarius said, addressing the Jackal Mutant we had been fighting moments before. "We come for the fragment of Sssssstatue and find you fighting femalesssssss and cubssssssss!"

"What Statue?" I asked, hoping to stall for time by feigning ignorance of the whole affair. Unfortunately, it did not work.

"Don't try to fool me, Thunderbrat!" Lizarius shot back, brandishing a two-headed axe in my direction. I gulped; those axe heads looked like they could do some serious damage. "The object given to usssss on New Thundera wassss not part of the Sssssssstatue! It was a fake, a Thundercat trick! Now, tell me! Where isssss the real fragment?!" His voice dropped to a low hiss, somehow far more menacing than it would have been had he been shouting.

"I'll never tell you, Scaleface!" I retorted before I could stop myself. Seconds later, I paid dearly for my rashness as a nearby Monkey Mutant, acting at a signal from Lizarius, pushed me to the floor and held me there at spearpoint. My mother and Lynxari moved to help, only to be forced back by several of the other Mutants.

"But you will, my insssssolent young friend," Lizarius told me. "Beaussssssse we already have the ressssssst of your people - and they will die unlessssssss you tell usssss what we want to know!"

I could hardly believe the demands of this Mutant. If I told him where I had hidden the fragment of Statue, the Cult of Mumm-Ra would be one step closer to completing their evil mission. But, if I kept quiet, the other Thundercats who had come to Third Earth would be slain - and I could not let that happen. Even though there were still Thundercats on New Thundera, I could not allow any of my people to be sacrificed. For the first time in my life, I began to understand what the Code of Thundera meant by "Justice, Truth, Honour and Loyalty"; at the same time, I gained a sense of the burden this would one day place on my shoulders.

"Sssssso?" Lizarius said when I showed no sign of replying. "You prefer to remain ssssssilent? Very well, you have twenty-four hoursssssss to make up your mind." He nodded to the rest of the Mutants. "Take them back to Casssssstle Plundarr and let them cool their heelsssss in the dungeon!"

And so I presently found myself being roughly flung into a dank underground cell built into the foundations of Castle Plundarr. Castle Plundarr was, I recalled from what Wilykit had told me, the stronghold the Mutants had built on Third Earth. No, scratch that - it was the fortress they had *forced* a primitive race of creatures called Brutemen to build and I suspect these Brutemen

would have been kept on as household slaves had my great-grandfather and the rest of the Thundercats not freed them. Anyway, this is where the Mutants had taken me, a large fortress built in the shape of a giant stone gargoyle, surrounded by a moat inhabited by all kinds of unspeakable creatures. I had not been allowed to look at my surroundings as I was dragged down to the dungeons, but from the few glimpses I managed, I could tell this place hadn't been inhabited in years.

Before I could pick myself up off the floor, the cell door was slammed shut. Then came the cackling laugh of the Jackal Mutant who had escorted me, followed by the sound of a door being bolted. I took stock of my surroundings, not an easy task as there was no source of light in the cell and the only illumination came from the barred grille set high on the door. Maybe, if the bars could be worked loose, that grille could provide me with a means of escape . . .

But, before I could attack the bars, I heard a voice calling to me from the next cell. "Don't waste time trying to break the bars - they're fixed solid." From the sound of the voice, I gathered that the speaker was an older male, but I could not tell what race he was.

Nevertheless, I reluctantly heeded his advice and decided instead to try and find out how he was able to communicate with me. It did not take me long to find out; some stones in the wall dividing the two cells had come loose, leaving a hole large enough to serve as a speaking hole, but not large enough to crawl through. I knelt down next to this hole and called through it in a loud whisper. "Who are you?"

"Lannal," came the reply. "I'm the leader of the Wolloos - or rather I was until the Mutants and Lunatacs captured us. All except my son, Koris . . ."

"Koris?" I echoed, recalling the young Wollo I had met in the forest.

"You know my son? Is he all right?" Lannal's tone carried an air of desperation, of being unable to relax until he was assured that all was well. I did not know what to say to him, but I did my best, telling him as much as I knew.

"Yes," I said. "We met in the forest and travelled together to Cats' Lair . . ."

"Cats' Lair?" repeated Lannal. "So you're a Thundercat?"

I nodded, then, remembering that he couldn't see me, replied out loud. "Yes. My name's Storm and . . ."

I was cut off abruptly by the sound of the cell door being unlocked. Seconds later, Lizarius strode into the cell looking absolutely full of himself. Flanking him were Jacklon (the Jackal Mutant my mother, Lynxari and I had tangled with back at Cats' Lair) and a female humanoid with light purple skin and long grey hair. Despite the colour of her hair, she looked young, but that wasn't all. There was a distinctive crescent mark on her forehead, as well as two small horns; she was a Lunatac.

"Sssssso," Lizarius said imperiously. "How are you liking your new quartersssssss, Thunderbrat?" I did not much care for his attitude; he was treating me like dirt for no reason other than the fact I happened to be a Thundercat. Well, there was no way I was going to let him get away with it. I was a future Thundercat Lord, after all, and I was not about to let this overgrown lizard get away with addressing me in this manner.

"Don't call me 'Thunderbrat' - my name's Storm!" I shot back, wishing I still had my chakram. But it had been confiscated when I was captured and was probably in the Mutants' armoury by now - if they hadn't melted it down for the metal. "And where are the other Thundercats?!"

"Ssssafe enough - for now!" Lizarius hissed at me. "But remember you have twenty-four hoursssss to reveal where the Sssssstatue fragment isss or . . ." He did not complete his sentence, choosing instead to pretend to cut his own throat. Then, he and his two cohorts left, leaving me to slump down in despair. There was no way I could ever tell the Cult of Mumm-Ra what they wanted to know, but, if I didn't, my fellow Thundercats would be slain. If only I had never been given that wretched fragment, I would not be in this mess now.

Just then, the sound of voices caught my attention: Lizarius and a female voice I had never heard before. "I don't see why we have to wait," the latter was saying. "If you left it to me, I'd have the answer from that brat before you could say 'Moons of Plundarr'."

"Your powersssss of Perssssuasssion are legendary, Grimla," replied Lizarius. "But, if the boy were to resssissst, it may kill him - and we need him alive."

"Alive?!" scoffed the female called Grimla. "What's one Thundercat brat more or less? In case you've forgotten, Lizarius, I am leader of the Psy Lunatacs." I gasped when I heard this. The Psy Clan of Lunatacs possessed incredible mental powers and it was said that many of them could hypnotise the weak-willed into doing their bidding with very little effort. Wilykit had spoken of a Psy Lunatac called Lurro (or something like that) who had these hypnotic powers and, from what I had just overheard, it seemed Grimla had them too.

"You may be leader of your people, but I, Lizariusssss, am High Priesssst of the Cult of Mumm-Ra!" Lizarius shot back. "You would do well to remember it, unlessssss you want to end your daysssss asss the next Offering!"

They moved out of earshot at that point, leaving me to struggle with what I had just overheard. I noticed that Jacklon had remained silent throughout the exchange between Lizarius and Grimla - in fact, I hadn't heard speak at Cats' Lair either. And then there was that word Lizarius had used, Offering; I did not know what that meant, but I suspected it was something too terrible to contemplate. I moved away from the door and made my way over to the hole in the wall dividing my cell from Lannal's.

"Lannal!" I called through the hole, speaking in a loud whisper. "Did you hear all that?"

"Yes, Storm. I fear all the Mutants and Lunatacs here belong to the Cult of Mumm-Ra. They believe it is their duty to . . ."

". . . set Mumm-Ra free," I concluded, recalling what had been discussed at the meeting back at Cats' Lair. That seemed a lifetime ago now, as did everything that had happened to me on New Thundera. For the first time since I had been sent on this mission, I wondered if I would ever return there, if I would ever see Hunter again. And I suspected that Ocelotra (who I hoped was still safe in the Tower of Omens with Fangelo) felt the same; he was her son after all. One thing was certain, however; if I wanted to see home again, I would have to escape from this cell and find my fellow Thundercats. Next, we would have to put a stop to the Cult of Mumm-Ra and their insane plans to resurrect Mumm-Ra - before it was too late. I didn't know why, but I had an uneasy feeling that time was very short, that the Cult would make their move any day now. That must be why all these incidents had been happening; the Cult were preparing for the day when they could bring Mumm-Ra back and need to destroy both the Book and the Statue of Omens to ensure that he could not be imprisoned again.

The Book, I knew from what Wilykit had told me, could only be destroyed by really powerful magic, magic beyond the scope of most beings. But I wouldn't it past the Cult to know of someone, a dark wizard or something along those lines, who did know the magic required. If so, it was vital that the Statue was reassembled and for that we needed all the fragments. Somehow, I would have to escape.

I must have said those last few words out loud without meaning to, because the next thing I heard was Lannal telling me I must not even consider it. "Even if you could get out of your cell, there are guards everywhere," he told me. "And, if you were caught, they would make an Offering of you!"

"An Offering?" I echoed, recalling how Lizarius had said the same word to Grimla.

"A blood sacrifice - that is the fate that awaits those captured by the Cult of Mumm-Ra. They might keep you alive for a while if they think you might be useful, but in the end . . ."

He could not continue and I was rendered temporarily speechless myself. Sacrifice, ritual slaughter, such was the fate that awaited my fellow Thundercats. If I refused to reveal where the fragment of Statue Wilykit had given me was hidden, the Cult was going to slay them in a barbaric ritual. Had I been sure that refusing to talk might encourage Lizarius to keep my comrades alive a while longer, I would have taken that option. But, somehow, I knew Lizarius had meant exactly what he had said.

I retreated from the hole in the wall and sat down on the floor, hugging my knees. I was trapped, imprisoned in a dank cell with little hope of salvation, and none of the Thundercats who still on New Thundera knew the situation. I thought about the Sword of Omens - if I had it, I would be

able to use it to get out here, free my fellow prisoners and defeat the Cult of Mumm-Ra. But I didn't and, I knew with a grim certainty, neither did my father. It must have been confiscated when he was captured so that he couldn't use it.

For the first time in my life, I began to understand what was meant by the word "despair".