Curse of Sekh
By Clare

Chapter 2

The Thundercats wasted no time in deciding what needed to be done if they were to have any hope of finding out what their age-old enemies were plotting. "If we're going to defeat whatever they've got planned, we'll need to be prepared," Tygra explained as the seven of them sat round the table in a council of war. "And that means we'll need to keep careful tabs on our "friends" in Castle Plundarr . . ."

"And how do you propose doing that?" asked Snarf, frowning slightly as he spoke. "We can't watch them 24/7 - and, besides, I've got a bad feeling about this."

Lion-O turned to face the Snarf who had been by his side for many years, first as a nursemaid and later as a loyal companion. "We all have a bad feeling about this, Snarf," he said. "And that's why we must find out what's going on around here - we'd be failing in our duties as Thundercats if we didn't solve this menace."

Whatever this particular menace is, Lion-O added silently as he turned back to the others. Ever since the Thundercats had arrived on Third Earth, a backwater planet they had never known existed until fate (in the form of a broken-down spacecraft forced them to alter their plans to settle on a planet in some other galaxy) landed them there, it seemed they had gone from one crisis to another. Mumm-Ra and the Mutants were chiefly to blame, of course, but there were plenty of other beings who held less-than-savoury motives . . .

"In any case, I agree with Tygra," he told his fellows. "From what I saw in the Sword, the Mutants have something planned and, if I know them, it won't be pleasent for us. But, until we know more, we will need to take certain precautions. And we must warn the Berbils, Warrior Maidens, Bolkins - any race allied with us - about this. Tell them to keep a careful eye out for the Mutants and let us know if they try anything."

"Kit and I can run messages on our Spaceboards," Wilykat piped up as he slid out of his seat and nodded to his sister. But, before she could follow suit, Cheetara put out a restraining hand and pressed the younger Thundercat female back down.

"You two, stay where you are," she warned as Panthro intercepted Wilykat on the way to the door. The Thunderkittens grumbled a little, muttering about being left out "just because they were kids", but resumed their seats in response to the stern look Lion-O gave them.

"Cheetara's right, you two," he said to the pair of young miscreants, adopting a tone that clearly said he would not stand for any arguments. "This ritual - or whatever it is - could be extremely dangerous and I don't want to put any Thundercat in danger. We're only concerned for your welfare . . ." He paused, recalling how Wilykit and Wilykat had been his age-mates back on Thundera, before he emerged from his Suspension Capsule as a young man but without living

through the usual traumas of adolescence. Then, he continued, explaining that the Thundercats would be divided into teams to scout the countryside.

"Cheetara and Tygra, you two warn the Warrior Maidens and the Unicorn Keepers," he told his fellows. "Panthro and Wilykat, you deal with the Bolkins, Berbils and Wollos. And that leaves Wilykit, Snarf and myself to alert the Tuskas and Snowmen."

As one, the Thundercats reached across the table so that their hands formed a circle of allegience. A shadow was looming over Third Earth and, only by working together, could they banish it at least temporarily.

Little did the Thundercats suspect that the Mutants had already obtained the third item Mumm-Ra needed, water from the River of Despair. That particular river was well named since it was home to some of the most unsavoury water creatures on Third Earth and most beings gave its waters a wide berth. No females scrubbed clothes on the stones on its banks. No children fished there in summer. No-one went close to it if at all possible . . .

But a sample of its water was required if Mumm-Ra was going to invoke the Curse of Sekh, so S-s-slythe, Monkian and Jackalman gathered on the banks, each of them keeping a wary distance from the edge. Like many of the other races who lived on Third Earth, they too normally stayed well clear of the River, not least because of the dangerous and unpredictable Black Widow Shark. Part shark and part spider, she lurked in the water ready to ambush unwary beings who encroached on her territory. And that was what the three Mutants were arguing about right now - who was going to brave the Black Widow Shark and get the water Mumm-Ra needed.

"I think this should be Jackalman'sssss job, yesssssssssss?" S-s-slythe was saying as his evil reptilian eyes gazed round at his two companions.

Jackalman winced and began to back away as he realised what S-s-slythe had in mind; there was no way he was going near that River if he was paid 1000 Plundarrian dollars. "Hey! No fair!" he told the others in a voice that tried in vain to sound calm and authoritive but actually sounded like that of a whining cub. "I already stole the Wollo bracelet."

S-s-slythe's response was swift - he seized the retreating Jackalman, preventing him from retreating any further, and frogmarched him the the River's edge. "Fair?!" he hissed between clenched teeth. "Ssssssince when did Mutantsssssssss care about being fair?" With his free hand, he pulled a water bottle off his belt and thrust it into Jackalman's paws. "Now, get that water - or elsssssssse . . .!"

"Or else what?" Jackalman demanded petulently, although he knew full well what the answer would be. S-s-slythe was someone you crossed at your peril and you certainly didn't say "or else what?" to him unless you wanted to spend the next week in Castle Plundarr's dankest and dingiest dungeon. In fact, had anyone thought to compile a list of Third Earth's most ruthless villians, S-s-slythe and Mumm-Ra would almost certainly have featured somewhere near the top.

S-s-slythe replied in the only way he knew how - by thrusting Jackalman's face into the water and holding it there for a few seconds before letting him up for air. Jackalman coughed and spluttered, but the Reptilian Mutant ignored his obvious discomfort and made to repeat the treatment. "Insssssssubordination issss it?!" S-s-slythe hissed as he gave Jackalman a vindictive kick. "Maybe a ducking will sssssssssort you out, coward!"

To prove his point S-s-slythe made to dunk the Jackal Mutant again, but, before he could do so, he was alerted by Monkian's voice calling from nearby. Monkian was hardly the brightest of the Mutants - in fact none of them were particularly famed for their intelligence - but he could hardly help noticing the danger his two cohorts were in. For, unseen by either S-s-slythe or Jackalman, the deadly Black Widow Shark was on the prowl, alerted by the prospect of fresh meat . . .

"Ooh ohh! Hadn't you two better get away from there?" Monkian called as his eyes tracked the swimming monstrosity that was about to ambush his unwary companions.

"Later, Monkian!" S-s-slythe snarled. "Firssst I need to teach thisssssss dog some ressssspect!"

Moments later, he forgot all about teaching anyone respect as the Black Widow Shark leapt out of the water, forcing the three Mutants to beat a somewhat undignified retreat to avoid her snapping jaws. Had they had the choice, they would have abandoned the mission and headed straight back to Castle Plundarr rather than face the Black Widow Shark a second time. But they knew full well that, if they failed Mumm-Ra in such an important mission, the results could make a meeting with the creature that lurked in this River seem like a summer picnic.

Fuming with anger, S-s-slythe seized the bottle and strode purposefully to the River's edge, determined that he would get that water this time, Black Widow Shark or no Black Widow Shark. "Mussssssssst I do everything myssssssself?!" he hissed impatiently as he knelt down and dipped the bottle into the water . . .

Cheetara and Tygra had already alerted the Warrior Maidens to the new threat from Castle Plundarr and had departed from the Treetop Kingdom, with Willa and Nayda having promised to step up their woodland patrols. All the two Thundercats had to do now was locate the Unicorn Keepers - rarely an easy task since they and the unicorns they tended ranged all over the forest - and inform them of the situation. But, as she and Tygra neared the heart of the forest, Cheetara was alerted by a sound few would want to hear - the panicked whinneying of a unicorn in distress.

Knowing that only the worst scum on Third Earth would dare hurt the peaceful and gentle unicorns, she immediately launched into the trademark of her race - Superspeed, the ability to sprint at speeds other Thunderian races could only dream of. It was an ability all purebred Cheetahs - and some half-Cheetahs as well - developed as they grew up and, while it was not designed for long-distance running, it was extremely useful if you had to get somewhere in a hurry. Such as now . . . To anyone observing, Cheetara was just a blur, a golden streak zooming

through the forest, but she was keenly aware of her surroundings and was easily able to avoid trailing roots and other obstacles that might have impeded her progress.

As she reached the source of the cries, Cheetara decelerated to walking pace; Superspeed took a lot out of her and she had been warned from a young age never to push herself too far. But she no longer had any need to run, for there was Monkian holding onto a beautiful female unicorn, a graceful creature whose silvery white body seemed to shimmer in the afternoon sun. The unicorn was clearly in considerable distress and was fighting in vain against the halter her captor had placed over her head to restrain her while he did what he had to.

"Oh no you don't!" Cheetara muttered as Monkian made a grab for the unicorn's tail. Wasting no time, she whipped out her staff and twirled it expertly at arm's length before releasing it and sending it flying across the forest. Moments later, a thwack followed by a yelp of pain from Monkian told her the weapon had found its target . . .

"Good work, Cheetara!" Tygra said as he appeared on the scene just in time to see Monkian making a dash for the trees. Since he lacked her speed, he had not arrived in time to see what the Mutant had been doing, but he had heard the whinneying unicorn and knew it could only mean trouble. "Let's hope the rest of them aren't skulking nearby," he added as he peered into the undergrowth.

"I'm sure Monkian was alone," Cheetara told him. But, seconds later, it became clear that she had spoken too soon . . .

A leather thong with a pebble tied to either end came hurtling out of the bushes on the opposite end of the clearing from where the two Thundercats were. So suddenly did it appear that there was no time for either of them to grab their own weapons and knock it down in mid-flight before it reached its target. That proved to be the unicorn Monkian had trapped; she had made a break for the trees when Cheetara intervened, but, before she had reached safety, the thong tangled in her hooves and she was swiftly tripped.

Immediately, Cheetara made to go to the creature's aid, only to be stopped in her tracks by an all too familiar rasping voice. "Sssssssstop there, Thundercatsssssssssss!" S-s-slythe hissed as the Mutants emerged from their hiding places.

Wasting no time, all four (for Vultureman was there as well) of the Mutants gathered around the hapless unicorn and pinned her down to make absolutely sure she couldn't fight back. At the sight of this, Cheetara and Tygra drew their weapons and stood poised to battle the bullying cowards - unfortunately, S-s-slythe was ready for such a move and promptly countered by prodding the unicorn's neck with his axe. "I sssssssssaid to sssssssstay back!" he hissed at them. "Sssssssso do asssssssssss I sssssssay - unlessssssssssssss you want to sssssssssee a headlessssssssss unicorn!"

The unicorn whinneyed loudly, her eyes rolling in fright as Cheetara and Tygra looked on helplessly. Outnumbered by two to one and with the creature they were trying to help threatened with a grisly death if either of them moved to attack the Mutants, the two Thundercats could only watch as Vultureman reached towards the unicorn's tail and quickly yanked out a handful of hairs from the tuft on the tip of her tail. Then, before the Thundercats could rush them, the Mutants made their escape, disappearing swiftly into the surrounding trees . . .

Cheetara wasted no time in hurrying to the unicorn's side and setting to work on the thong round her hooves. The creature trembled visably - evidently, her recent ordeal at the hands of the Mutants was still fresh in her mind - but soon calmed down as she recognised Cheetara as a Thundercat, an ally of the unicorns and their keepers. Even so, she continued to keep a wary eye on the bushes as if expecting the Mutants to ambush her again.

"Any serious injuries?" Tygra asked at length as Cheetara checked the state of the unicorn's legs.

"Don't seem to be, but she is in shock . . . Tygra," Cheetara demanded at length, "what could possess someone to hurt a unicorn?"

"I think we both know the answer to that," Tygra said grimly. As he spoke, he stared at the bushes into which the Mutants had disappeared, his eyes narrowed as he reflected on his words. Only those whose hearts were consumed by evil would even consider such a thing . . .

Just then, a rustling in the bushes heralded the arrival of a short woman in a long light blue gown, whose pointed ears and star-shaped facial marking gave her a somewhat elfin appearance. She was one of the two unicorn keepers, beings who lived with the unicorns and dedicated their lives to protecting the gentle creatures. "Who is hurting the unicorns?" she demanded of the two Thundercats, her staff raised ready to deal with any unwelcome visitors.

"Mutants," Cheetara replied, glancing in the direction of the bushes. "They trapped one of them and took some hairs from her tail . . . The question is, why? What could they want with a unicorn's tail hair?"

"That's not all," Tygra added wearily. "We had a run-in with them at the Wollo Village earlier and the only thing they took was a bracelet belonging to a young Wollo girl. Nothing else was lost at all - they didn't even cause all that much damage . . ."

He would probably have said a lot more had the Unicorn Keeper not cut in. "Was there anything else?" she asked urgently, fixing both Thundercats with a piercing stare as she spoke. "Try to remember, both of you."

Cheetara nodded slowly. "I've been having bad feelings lately, as if something evil is going to befall Third Earth," she explained, a trouble expression etched on her face. "And Lion-O saw something in the Eye of the Sword, the Mutants and he said they seem to be planning a ceremony of some sort - we were on our way to warn you and your husband when we ran across them."

The Unicorn Keeper frowned slightly, a troubled expression etched on her serene features. "This is serious indeed," she said. "Cheetara, Tygra, the race of the Unicorn Keepers is ancient, dating back to the days when this was still First Earth. In those times, we mingled freely with humans and our unicorns even interbred with ordinary horses. Until the fateful day a human sorceror named Sekh sought to expand his knowledge to gain control over the whole world . . ."

"Sekh was powerful, according to the Legends - I believe he was among the first to contact the Ancient Spirits of Evil, long before Mumm-Ra. Anyway, he devised a spell that required the following ingredients - a Wollo bracelet, water from the River of Despair (although that was just an ordinary river then), venom from a Golden Cobra, the tail-hair of a unicorn and blood taken from a young female . . ."

Silence held sway for several moments before Cheetara spoke up. "Unicorn Keeper?" she asked. Neither of the Unicorn Keepers had ever revealed their true names to anyone. "How do you know of all this?"

"I know because it was one of my own ancestors who defeated Sekh and banished him to the Abyss. Unfortunately, he preserved the secrets of his spell in the very fabric of his palace and, many centuries later, humans searching for clues regarding the past accidentally unleashed the evil he had wrought. It was this that turned First Earth into Second Earth, wiping out all human civilisation - only the Forgotten Races, the Wollos, Bolkins and my own people to name but three, remained."

"So now you think Mumm-Ra has learned of this spell of Sekh's?" Tygra mused, dismissing for the moment the question of what had turned Second Earth into Third Earth. Presumably, it had something to do with Sekh, but he couldn't be absolutely sure. "Are you sure this is the same spell?"

The Unicorn Keeper nodded reluctantly. For many centuries, her people had guarded their magic totally and divulged its secrets only to their own children, but their numbers had declined steadily over the centuries and, as far as she was aware, she and her husband were now the only ones left. Even so, she was loath to reveal too much to outsiders, even if they were allies, so she settled for the simple explanation. "Assuredly so - there is no other spell on Third Earth that requires both a Wollo bracelet and a unicorn's tail hair," she told the two Thundercats.

"Is there any way to stop it once it's been unleashed?" Cheetara asked next.

The Unicorn Keeper shook her head and Cheetara and Tygra knew immediately what they must do. They must get back to Cats' Lair and contact the other Thundercats so that the seven of them could work out a way of stopping Mumm-Ra before he could call down the spell.