Curse of Sekh
By Clare

Chapter 3

Cheetara and Tygra wasted no time in getting back to Cats' Lair after hearing the Unicorn Keepers' story. The moment the two Thundercats were safely inside their fortress, Tygra switched on the telescreens so they would have more chance of spotting an enemy before it could attack. Not that this was a foolproof security system - Mumm-Ra had been known to trick his way in by using his ability to disguise himself - but it had often provided the Thundercats with early warnings of attack. Next, with the screen showing no signs of movement on the plains outside (although how long that would last with what Mumm-Ra and the Mutants were planning was anybody's guess) he switched on the transmittor and prepared to contact the other Thundercats.

"Have you managed to warn everyone?" he asked, even though he did not doubt his fellows for a moment. Even so, it was a relief to him when Panthro's voice came through via the communicator installed on the Thundertank, assuring him that he and Wilykat had and were already on their way back to Cats' Lair.

"Message acknowledged, Panthro," Tygra replied. "Lion-O has your group fulfilled its part of the mission?"

"Affirmitive, Tygra," Lion-O's voice replied. "The Tuskas and the Snowmen say they'll be watching out for any signs of trouble. I only hope it'll be enough to deal with whatever Mumm-Ra's planning," he added as an afterthought.

Tygra paused when he heard the young Lord's words; what Lion-O had said was exactly what he, Tygra, was thinking. The Unicorn Keepers' tale of Sekh and the spell that could destroy all that the Thundercats and their allies sought to protect had given him and Cheetara extra cause for concern. If, as they had been told, the Curse of Sekh could not be halted once it was unleashed, their only hope was to stop Mumm-Ra before he could do so.

"Anyway, I think you'd all better get back here," Tygra told his fellows. "Cheetara and I found out something and you all need to know about it . . ."

"Who is this Sekh character anyway?" asked Wilykit once Cheetara and Tygra had finished explaining what the Unicorn Keepers had told them. The girl had never heard the name before, but there was something about it that made her shiver as if she was lying on a bed of ice. There was something in that name that seemed . . . evil, like a force that existed solely to cause death and destruction.

"Whoever he is, he sounds evil," Snarf remarked, covering his eyes with his hands and shuddering involuntarily. He seemed like a creature who didn't like fights, who would rather sit

back at a safe distance and watch others do the dangerous stuff, but that didn't mean he didn't have skills of his own. And the Mutants had once made the mistake of underestimating him.

But Sekh was an unknown quantity, someone about whom the Thundercats had no information other than what Tygra and Cheetara had been told. And, as Jaga had often advised back on Thundera, it is always best to know your enemy, to know where its weak points are so you can exploit them. Mumm-Ra's weakness was his inability to stand the sight of his own reflection, the Mutants' their inability to work together without bickering among themselves. However, this Sekh character . . .

Lion-O got to his feet and paced the room. All his life, he had been warned that there would be times when, as Lord of the Thundercats, he must protect his fellows from peril and now the burden seemed to weigh even more heavily than it usually did. Something had to be done to stop Mumm-Ra from invoking the Curse of Sekh - but what? Would it be feasible to try and stop the Mutants before they could deliver the items they had been sent to collect? Or were the items already in Mumm-Ra's Pyramid, being prepared for their use in the evil ritual?

"No!" Lion-O said out loud. "We've always beaten Mumm-Ra before and we can do so again. I swear on the Code of Thundera that . . ."

He was cut off abruptly as a sudden laser blast rocked Cats' Lair, knocking Wilykat off his feet and sending Cheetara hurrying to check the telescreen. By switching to the view from the side of Cats' Lair that was nearest to Castle Plundarr and zooming in by 200%, she was able to pinpoint the source of the blasts - two Mutant Sky-cutters were flying around and shooting at the fortress as if in a bid to weaken its defences.

"Battle stations!" Tygra ordered after he had seen the attacking Mutants for himself. "We've got to stop those Sky-cutters!"

"Snarf! Don't we have enough problems without an attack on Cats' Lair?" Snarf muttered as his fellow Thundercats ran towards the Thundertank, their weapons readied in case it came to hand-to-hand combat.

Directly outside Cats' Lair, S-s-slythe and Vultureman were lying in wait, armed with the latter's latest invention. Vultureman was forever dreaming up new gadgets for the Mutants to use in their never-ending war against the Thundercats - unfortunately (or fortunately depending on your viewpoint) they never seemed to work quite as he'd planned. There always seemed to be some flaw that the Thundercats ended up exploiting . . .

But not this time, the Vulture Mutant told himself. This invention was going to work - it had to if the last item needed for Mumm-Ra to invoke the Curse of Sekh was to be obtained. As the Thundertank drew level with the two hidden Mutants, Vultureman nodded to S-s-slythe and raised a small red cannister with a pump-action nozzle. "Masks on!" he screeched, removing a

face mask that had been elongated to fit over his beak from a loop in his belt and tying it securely round his beak.

"I hope thisssssss sssssssstuff worksssssss!" S-s-slythe snarled as he fastened on his own mask. Vultureman's only response was to raise the cannister he was holding and begin to unscrew the safety catch that prevented it from being sprayed accidentally.

"It will, S-s-slythe," he told the Reptilian Mutant, keeping a wary distance from S-s-slythe's powerful tail. "This is a very powerful sleeping gas - one breath and those Thunderfools will be in dreamland for exactly three hours. Precisely enough time to grab that little brat and get clean away . . ."

Panthro frowned as he realised something wasn't right and a quick glance at the sky confirmed his suspicions - both Sky-cutters had disappeared from view, leaving the summer afternoon peaceful and quiet. A little *too* quiet . . . One of the first things he had learned during his warrior training back on Thundera was that silence could be even deadlier than the roar of battle. Silence could signal an impending ambush.

"I don't like this at all," he told his fellow Thundercats. "Those Mutants flew off the second they saw us coming and that isn't their style . . ." He stood up in the Thundertank's cockpit and gripped his nunchucks tightly, testing the weight of the weapon in case any Mutants decided to show themselves.

"What's the problem," Wilykat said glibly, leaning across from the rear of the Thundertank. "If they're gone, we can get back to Cats' Lair and . . ."

"Panthro's right, Wilykat," Tygra chided, cutting the youngster off in mid-sentence. "It seems to me those Mutants lured us out here to . . ." Seconds later, he too was cut short as a sudden cloud of purple smoke wafted towards the Thundertank. The Thundercats had no time to get clear of it before it overcame them and they all slumped down in an unconscious heap . . .

Still wearing their masks in case they inhaled any of the Sleep Gas they had just unleashed, the Mutants stepped into the midst of the fallen Thundercats. As he stepped over Lion-O's prone form, S-s-slythe noticed the Sword of Omens clasped in the young Lord's hands but resisted the urge to touch the blade. The Mutants already knew they could not handle the Sword since it never responded to an evil command - besides, they had a specific purpose, to bring Wilykit to Mumm-Ra.

"Get the brat, Monkian!" S-s-slythe ordered. "We'll take her to Mumm-ra - and then the new order ssssssshall begin, yesssssssss?"

As the Mutants retreated with Wilykit slung over Monkian's shoulder, the Eye of Thundera began to hum loudly and a sharp discordant note issued forth . . .

Lion-O woke to find the Sword of Omens blaring out its warning that a Thundercat was in danger. Without even thinking about it, he drew the sacred blade and held it up to his face so that the crossbars on the hilt were level with his eyes.

"Sword of Omens, give me Sight Beyond Sight!" he commanded. And, as the crossbars curled upwards, a scene began to unfold out of the grey mist that appeared for a few seconds before the Eye of Thundera had fully opened. The Mutants were assembled in Castle Plundarr (Jackalman had his feet planted firmly on the table) apparently in a very good mood about something; Lion-O could see S-s-slythe and Monkian drinking copiously from what looked suspiciously like flagons of wine. And something that put the Mutants in such jolly humour could only bode ill for the Thundercats . . .

Lion-O's fears were confirmed when the Sword panned across to a heavily padlocked cage which held a solitary prisoner. The person was small, either a member of a dwarf race such as the Wollos or a child. Their face was in shadow, but, when the prisoner turned round briefly, Lion-O was able to see who it was. It was Wilykit, her wrist shackled securely to the bars of the cage.

That was all it took. Not stopping to think about waiting for his fellow Thundercats to wake up, Lion-O sheathed the Sword of Omens and headed off in the direction of Castle Plundarr. He had no idea what the Mutants planned to do with Wilykit, only that it had to be something bad, possibly something connected with the Curse of Sekh. And, as Lord of the Thundercats, it was his duty to help . . .

Wilykit groaned as the effects of the Mutants' sleep gas wore off. She slowly opened her eyes to find herself in what she could only describe as a nightmare, imprisoned in a cage and chained to the bars. It took her a moment to take stock of her surroundings, but there was no mistaking that dank odour, that dark and dingy room that looked like it had never once been cleaned. She was in Castle Plundarr, the Mutants' stronghold. And S-s-slythe was coming straight towards her prison.

Her first instinct was use her free hand to grab for one of the myriad of powders she carried in pouches on her belt, but it was soon apparent that something was missing. Her pouches were no longer on her belt and, judging by the fumes issuing from Vultureman's laboratory down below, she had a pretty good idea what must have happened. The Mutants must have removed them while she was unconscious and Vultureman must have decided to use the substances they contained (substances that could set someone off sneezing, cause unbearable itching or even create monsters) in one of his experiments.

S-s-slythe was now right outside Wilykit's cage, the foul stench of his Reptilian breath wafting into her nostrils and forcing her to clap her free hand over her mouth. The Mutant leaned forward and scratched the frightened girl with his sharp claw. "Here, kitty kitty, yesssssss!" he laughed, grinning evilly at the sight of the young Thundercat cringing away from him. There were few

things he enjoyed more than having someone at his mercy . . . especially if that someone happened to be a Thundercat.

"Let me out of here, you slimy lizard!" Wilykit shouted in a tone that sounded somewhat braver than she felt. She was unarmed - even her lariat had been taken from her - and imprisoned in Castle Plundarr, one of the worst situations a Thundercat could be in. But she didn't yet know the full severity of her situation, that the Mutants had captured her with the sole objective of handing her over to Mumm-Ra so she could provide the final ingredient required to call down the Curse of Sekh.

"Tsk tsk!" S-s-slythe said with mock disapproval. "Sssssuch insssssolence from a little girl! We can't have that, yesssssssss?"

"What do you want of me?" Wilykit demanded, trying to suppress the tremor in her voice and wishing she had something she could use to bash S-s-slythe with. S-s-slythe responded by letting loose an evil cackling laugh and pulling out a ring of large iron keys. Wilykit stared at him cautiously - surely he, a Mutant, wasn't about to free her just like that . . .

"We're going for a ride, my little missssss!" S-s-slythe hissed evilly as he freed Wilykit from her chains and roughly hauled her out of the cage.

Concern was growing at Cats' Lair; there were two Thundercats who had been unaccounted for since the Mutants released their sleep gas. Tygra was pacing from the telescreen to the conference table and back again, while Panthro sat with his head in his hands and Cheetara tried to massage the tension out of his shoulders. Wilykat had wanted to be alone and had retreated to the room he and Wilykit shared - right now, he sat on the floor, staring blankly at the wall, his mind filled with dread at the thought of what could have happened to his sibling. Cheetara had tried to persuade him to join the others, but he had refused.

"Any idea where they could be?" Cheetara asked at length.

"None," Tygra said, his frustration clear on his face. "And that's what worries me. Especially with what Mumm-Ra and the Mutants have planned - we need to . . ." He paused in mid-sentence as he chanced to glance at Cheetara. The Cheetah Thundercat was standing perfectly still, her eyes glowing with an odd light, and seemed totally oblivious to her surroundings.

"Tonight the final act shall begin," she said in a voice that sounded mysteriously remote, as if she was speaking from a great distance. "The Ever Living is even now preparing for his triumph and only his mortal enemies can stop him. However, he holds one of their number prisoner - for she must provide the final ingredient . . ."

Panthro and Tygra watched Cheetara with growing concern. They had seen her enter these trances before and were well aware of the effect they could have on her. Afterwards, she would often be weak and slightly disorientated for a time; consequently, even though she *could* call

forth a vision voluntarily, she never did so unless it was absolutely essential. Even so, neither Thundercat could recall seeing her in a trance quite like this . . . And what did it mean by "She must provide the final ingredient"? They knew who the "Ever Living" was, of course and "his mortal enemies" had to be themselves, the Thundercats.

Then Tygra remembered something the Unicorn Keepers had said - one of the ingredients needed to call forth the Curse of Sekh was the blood of a young girl.

"Wilykit!" he said out loud, crossing to the telescreen and staring out at the countryside surrounding Cats' Lair. It looked quiet and peaceful, with nothing to indicate that anything was amiss. But, as Jaga had reminded the Thundercats time and time again, appearences could be deceiving.

Lion-O had arrived at Castle Plundarr to find it strangely empty. Ordinarily, any Thundercat who ventured near the place had to run the gauntlet of the Mutants, but, as he crossed the moat (dodging the monsters that lived there as he did so) he didn't see a soul. Nonetheless, he knew the folly of assuming the quiet meant no-one was home and unsheathed the Sword of Omens in preparation for any surprises that might be lurking round the corner.

"Strange," he said to himself after he had made it through three corridors without being challenged. "Someone should have seen me by now . . ."

But, as long as he remained unchallenged, he didn't have to focus on anything except finding Wilykit and getting her out. With a bit of luck, he might be able to free her on his own so that the two of them could get clear of Castle Plundarr before the Mutants came back. But, when he reached the room he had seen through the Eye, he realised it was not going to be that simple.

The cage Wilykit had been imprisoned in stood open - and empty. The chains which had bound her to the bars trailed loosely on the floor. Lion-O stooped to examine them, noting as he did so that the manacles had been unlocked. The Mutants must have taken Wilykit somewhere. But where?

The answer came to him almost immediately - Mumm-Ra's Pyramid. It wasn't the first time a Thundercat had been taken to the Pyramid, but, possibly as a result of what Mumm-Ra was currently planning, Lion-O felt a chill of foreboding. Wilykit, he knew instinctively as he raced out of Castle Plundarr, was in serious trouble - and so were all good Third Earthlings if Mumm-Ra wasn't stopped from calling down the Curse. This was more than he could handle by himself.

There was only one thing for it. With a practiced air, he pointed the Sword of Omens directly at the sky and called out the incantation that activated the Thundercat Signal.

"Thunder . . . Thunder . . . Thunder . . . THUNDERCATS HO!"

Within seconds, the Eye of Thundera opened wide and a powerful beam of light issued forth, projecting the Thundercat insignia onto the sky. Now, it was up to Tygra, Panthro, Cheetara, Wilykat and Snarf to see it and come to their Lord's aid.