Curse of Sekh
By Clare

Chapter 4

Cheetara was the first to see the Signal shining like a beacon on the horizon, summoning the Thundercats to Lion-O's aid. Almost immediately, her Sixth Sense flashed a warning that this was serious, that the Thundercats would have to act fast. She turned to the others.

"Panthro, get the Thundertank!" she ordered. "I have a bad feeling about this . . ."

Panthro knew better than to question Cheetara's instincts - her Sixth Sense had provided early warning of trouble before - and, stopping only to grab his nunchucks, hurried to do as she said. As he brought the vehicle round to his companions, he gazed ruefully at the horizon, noting the direction the Signal came from - Castle Plundarr. And, if Lion-O was there, Wilykit might be as well; if she wasn't, they would have to find out where she was before it was too late.

"Get in!" he directed his companions.

Within moments, the Thundertank was rumbling its way towards Castle Plundarr with Panthro in the driving seat. Tygra sat beside him, while Cheetara, Wilykat and Snarf took up the rear seats, their nerves put on edge by the urgency of the situation. Wilykat looked across at the seat normally occupied by his sister and suppressed a shudder as he thought of what the Mutants could do to her.

"I sure hope Kit's all right," he said out loud, staring at the Cat Signal on the horizon. Like most siblings, he and Wilykit quarreled sometimes, but they were close friends all the same and neither would have wished serious harm on the other. But, he reminded himself, the Thundercats had been in trouble countless times before and had always come through it together. All seven of them . . .

"It's not just Lion-O and Wilykit we're worried about," Tygra reminded the youngster. "We still need to stop Mumm-Ra before he . . ."

"Yeah, I know - the Curse of Sekh."

"Full speed ahead!" Tygra told Panthro. In response, Panthro gunned the Thundertank's engines and did a sharp turn to avoid a fallen tree trunk. He moved so abruptly that the Thundercats in the rear of the vehicle fell off their seats and went sprawling in an awkward and undignified pile. Snarf extracted himself from under Wilykat and frowned ruefully.

"Hey! Watch it!" he muttered.

Panthro glanced over his shoulder as his three companions resumed their seats. "Sorry, Snarf," he said. But there was no time to stop for anything and even that fallen tree might prove to be one obstacle too many. Panthro frowned to himself and focussed on the way ahead; only when

they reached their destination would they be able to do anything about whatever had prompted Lion-O's Signal. Indeed, Jaga had once said that the beginning of wisdom was knowing when you could or couldn't change something. And, even though Panthro's senses had been on edge all day, he knew there was little any of the five Thundercats could do at the moment except answer the ancient summons.

Shaking with fear, Wilykit was dragged towards the Black Pyramid, her wrists still manacled and a leather collar around her neck. The latter had a lead attached to it and S-s-slythe took great delight in tugging on it just to see the look of fear in the girl's eyes. She was right to be fearful, for this was the place good Third Earthlings dreaded above all others on the planet. The vast onyx walls with obelisks placed in each corner seemed to be the embodiment of evil and a shiver went down her spine as her captors led her towards the structure.

"Mighty Mumm-Ra!" S-s-slythe intoned. "We have the ingredientsssssss you require and we bring the girl who shall provide the key to . . ."

Wilykit blanked him out. She did not know what he meant by her providing a key, but, if Mumm-Ra was involved in this, it could only be bad news for her and for all the Thundercats. Should she make a break for it? A quick assessment of her situation told her not - she was weaponless, outnumbered by four to one and on the threshold of Mumm-Ra's domain. And that was one of the worst situations a Thundercat could be in . . .

Mumm-Ra's voice cut through Wilykit's thoughts. "Place her in my ante-chamber," he ordered the Mutants. "I will come for her at nightfall and then . . ." He paused to allow himself an evil cackle as he thought of all the preparations he had made that day. "Then, the New Age shall begin!" His evil laugh echoed eerily as the Pyramid opened up and Jackalman seized hold of Wilykit, removed the collar from around her neck and dragged her brutally to the opening.

"Get in there!" the Jackal Mutant spat as he gave Wilykit a vindictive shove and sent her tumbling into the Pyramid . . .

Meanwhile, the Thundercats had reached Castle Plundarr to find Lion-O waiting for them, alone. He was keeping a tight grip on the Sword of Omens, even though the Signal had by now faded, and the look on his face told all of them that things were not good. Cheetara's sense that this was really serious had been all but confirmed.

"What's going on, Lion-O?" she asked as the Thundertank drew level with him and he climbed in beside Wilykat. "Where's Wilykit?"

"Not here - I've searched all over." Lion-O rested his chin on his hands as he pondered how best to deal with this situation, where he should look for the missing Thunderkitten. Wilykit and Wilykat had caused plenty of trouble in the past, sneaking out when told to stay in Cats' Lair,

opening old tombs and various other childish misadventures. But they were Thundercats through and through and, as such . . . How would Jaga have handled something like this?

As if on cue, Jaga's ghostly form materialised. Visible only to Lion-O, although the other Thundercats could sense his presence, he began to offer words of advice to the young Thundercat he had trained for leadership almost from birth. As a boy on Thundera, Lion-O had admired and respected his mentor, who, although never officially Lord of the Thundercats himself, had often fulfilled certain duties which old Claudus' blindness had prevented him from fulfilling. Saying goodbye to Jaga before entering the suspension capsule had been particularly difficult since Lion-O had known it was the last time he would see the old Thundercat alive. But, even though Jaga's physical body was long dead, his spirit had lived on as Lion-O's guide.

"Time is short, my young Lord," Jaga said now. "For tonight shall be the night when Mumm-Ra performs the ritual that will bring down the Curse of Sekh."

"How do you know about that?" Lion-O asked. The Curse of Sekh was, from what he had been able to discover, a spell that had originated on Third Earth. So how had Jaga, a Thunderian who had never set foot on Third Earth in his lifetime, come to hear about it?

"Those who dwell in the Netherworld see all and know all," Jaga replied. "You must stop Mumm-Ra before he casts the spell - otherwise, all shall be lost." With that, he swept his cloak around him, as had been his habit in life, and winked out of existence. Lion-O turned to his fellow Thundercats.

"We have no time to lose," he told them. "Mumm-Ra could already be preparing for the Curse. And we still have to find Wilykit . . ." He paused and frowned as he scanned the horizon, wondering for the umpteenth time just where all this was going to lead. As Lord of the Thundercats, he had a sacred duty to fight the forces of evil no matter what the cost and it was also his duty to aid any Thunderian in danger.

"We still don't know where she is," Snarf reminded him. The small red creature shuddered involuntarily; instinct told him that Wilykit was in serious danger. "Snarf!"

"Then we'll have to find out," said Tygra, his hand gripping his whip as he spoke. He and Cheetara exchanged glances as the latter's eyes suddenly glowed with an unnatural light. "Cheetara? What is it?" But there was no need to ask - it was already obvious the Cheetah Thunderian was having another of her visions. She was lost in a trance, completely oblivious to the other Thundercats, her mind filled with images of events happening well out of physical sight.

She saw Mumm-Ra standing at his cauldron with S-s-slythe, Vultureman and Jackalman assembled before him. Each Mutant held one of the items they had collected to help Mumm-Ra call down the Curse; S-s-slythe held the bottle containing the water from the River of Despair, Jackalman had Dari's bracelet and Vultureman had the tail hair plucked from the unicorn

Cheetara and Tygra had encountered in the forest. Mumm-Ra was still in his mummy form, his decaying hand in the act of opening another bottle, one which, judging by its resemblence to a snake, held Golden Cobra venom.

"Oh Mighty Sekh!" Mumm-Ra intoned as he poured the venom into his cauldron and watched with evil satisfaction as caustic green fumes spurted out. The Mutants kept well back, their eyes smarting as the cauldron continued to bubble and smoke, but none of them dared leave. "I, Mumm-Ra, Ever-living Source of Evil, call on you to heed my words. I have assembled the five key ingredients to bring down my enemies once and for all . . ."

With that, he stepped back a pace and began the ancient chant that transformed him into the most feared being on Third Earth. "Ancient Spirits of Evil!" he cried, raising his arms as he spoke. "Transform this decaying form to . . . Mumm-Ra the Ever-living!"

There was a sound akin to a crash of thunder and the statues surrounding the cauldron glowed as Mumm-Ra literally grew before the Mutants' eyes. He shed the bandages which encased his body as he changed from a decaying mummy to an imposing and powerful figure with piercing red eyes and the image of a black snake on a red circular background emblazoned on his chest. He looked every inch the Ever-living Source of Evil and smiled wickedly to himself as he thought of what would happen in just a few hours. The Curse of Sekh required each ingredient after the Cobra venom to be added at a set time and it was all he could do to keep himself from dumping everything into his cauldron there and then.

For now, though, he settled for giving his underlings a look of evil triumph. Tonight, he mused, tonight would be the last night those infernal Thundercats ever saw. And as for that little brat imprisoned in his pyramid awaiting her role in the ritual . . .

As abruptly as it had begun, Cheetara's vision faded. She shook her head to clear her fuzzy senses and turned to the others. "We have no time to lose," she told them. "Mumm-Ra has already added the first ingredient."

"What?! Let me at that foul mummy!" Panthro swerved the Thundertank around and turned it in the direction of the Black Pyramid. He knew venturing into Mumm-Ra's territory was risky, but there didn't seem to be much choice. Not if they wanted to stop their enemies this time . . .

Panthro had swerved so abruptly that Lion-O and Cheetara had fallen from their seats and ended up in a rather "compromising" position. Trying to maintain his composure, Lion-O disentangled himself and resumed his seat, rubbing his thigh where he had banged it against the floor of the Tank. Beside him, Snarf huddled down as if in a bid to make himself as small as possible to any lurking enemy.

"Snarf! Don't kill us!" he said out loud. He covered his eyes with his ears and wished for the umpteenth time that the Mutants and Mumm-Ra would go away and stay away.

"Easy, Snarf." Lion-O patted the Snarf reassuringly. He was about to address Panthro, asking him what on Third Earth he was doing driving like a maniac who'd had too much Thundera Red Wine, when something interupted him. A cloud had appeared in the sky - nothing unusual in itself, except for the fact that this cloud was a deep scarlet colour and seemed to be pulsing like a living thing. It would contract briefly, then expand and contract again, all the while giving out an eerie light. It was as if someone had planted a beating heart in the sky.

"If that has anything to do with Mumm-Ra . . ." Tygra started, gazing up at the unnatural cloud. Since arriving on Third Earth, he and the other Thundercats had seen such phenomena many times and, in his experience, they generally meant trouble . . .

"We're in trouble," concluded Wilykat, voicing what Tygra and all the Thundercats were thinking. If this was part of the Curse of Sekh, it was more important than ever that they stopped Mumm-Ra before he completed the ritual. Lion-O turned to look at his companions - Panthro, Tygra, Wilykat, Cheetara and Snarf, six of his fellow Thundercats. As their Lord, he had a duty to all the Thundercats, including the missing seventh member of the team. No matter what happened, they had to rescue Wilykit and stop Mumm-Ra before it was too late.

"Even so, we have no choice but to keep going," he told the others. "If we turn back now, Wilykit's finished - and so are we." He gripped the Sword of Omens and prayed for the strength he would need in the battle ahead.

Mumm-Ra stood before his cauldron, the carrier containing the water S-s-slythe had collected from the River of Despair in his hand. The time was drawing near. Three ingredients had already been added. All that remained was the water and the blood of a young female. He allowed himself a low cackle at the thought of the latter and slowly uncorked the water carrier. Raising it above his head for all the assembled Mutants to see, he called out to the unseen but all-powerful forces he was summoning.

"Waters of Despair, give power to my spell!" he shouted as he poured the water into the cauldron. The instant it touched the substance contained within the cauldron, great plumes of acrid smoke shot out and quickly filled the chamber. The Mutants coughed on the smoke, their eyes stinging, but did not dare leave for fear of angering Mumm-Ra. Fortunately, it only took a few seconds before things settled down again and the five evil-doers could make out their surroundings. They looked familiar enough, but there was a change in the atmosphere, a delicious feeling hanging in the air.

That feeling was triumph. Only a few short hours to wait until the Curse of Sekh was fully unleashed . . .

Deep in the bowels of Mumm-Ra's Pyramid, Wilykit crouched by a marble carving of some creature whose identity she didn't know - and, quick frankly, didn't want to know. She was tired,

hungry and thirsty, unsure how long she had been languishing down here beyond the fact that it must be at least a few hours by now. She thought longingly of the world above - would she ever see it again? Or would Mumm-Ra, after her "role" in this ritual he was conducting, make her his prisoner for eternity?

She shuddered at the thought and tried to doze off, hoping to at least solve the problem of her tiredness. But Mumm-Ra's Pyramid was not the best place on Third Earth to take a nap (not one that wasn't brought on by some evil enchantment at least) as there was something about it that affected the sleeping mind. The instant she closed her eyes, she was beset by all the worst memories of her young life . . .

She saw herself and Wilykat as toddlers back on Thundera. They were with a young Thunderian woman whose name she didn't know but whose face was remarkably familiar - except for the fact that her nose was slightly different, her cheekbones a little higher, she was an exact copy of how Wilykit might look ten years from now. The distinctive badge on the front of her pale pink gown indicated that she was a Thundercat, but Wilykit had no time to reflect on this before Mutant craft swooped down, peppering the area with shots. The unknown Thundercat shielded the infant Thunderkittens with her body as, all around them, battle raged. Then a laser took her in the back and she fell forward . . .

With a jolt, Wilykit realised who the woman was. It was her and Wilykat's mother, Catflora, the one who had sacrificed herself to save her children. This triggered long repressed memories of how, when the battle died down and silence reigned, she and Wilykat had crawled out from under the body of their mother and looked down at her in numb disbelief. "Mama?" Wilykit called, too young to understand what had just happened. Then, when this brought no response, she called again, her child's voice echoing folornly across the battlefield. "Mama! Mama! MAMA!"

Woken by the sound of her own voice calling for her lost parent, Wilykit shivered, not as a result of cold but of fear, fear of a memory she had suppressed all her life. She pulled her knees up to her chin and prayed the other Thundercats would get here before it was too late.

As it so happened, the other Thundercats were already outside the Pyramid, as yet unaware that Wilykit was a prisoner inside. All they knew at the moment was that time was running out, that the Curse of Sekh was close to being fully unleashed. And, if they did not stop Mumm-Ra in time, all would be lost. Already, the cloud which had appeared in the sky earlier had expanded sufficiently to blot out the sun and leave Third Earth in an eerie twilight.

"There's no time to lose," Lion-O was saying. "We'll have to get inside . . ." Preferably without getting caught, he added silently as he scanned the Pyramid for signs of one of its many secret entrances.