

Into the Deep

By Nine Tiger

It had all begun with the infernal hum.

"Panthro, can't you trace that noise?" Tygra asked. The architect of Cats' Lair shook his head to ward off the offending sound. His entire body buckled so tightly with stress that his constricting blue clothing only added to his physical distress.

The grey panther gave him a look that suggested that the tiger needed to have a mental examination, since he had asked the same question repeatedly. Panthro said with exasperation, "I told you before that I have checked all the systems. You haven't found anything in three days of looking yourself. There is nothing amiss. You foiled Mumm-Ra's plan with mind power, and never took the proper rest afterwards. You, of all people, should know that use of your gift leaves you out of sorts for days. You just need to give that great brain of yours a rest."

Just what I have not been able to do, the tiger thought with annoyance. I have not slept since that damnable tone started.

A door slid open. Shapely Cheetara entered the control room carrying a tray upon which rested a bowl of hot fish soup. She placed the tray next to the console where Tygra attempted to crunch numbers yet again on the lair systems in the hopes of finding the source of the anomaly. "Eat," she ordered.

The architect stared into the soup. For a moment, his vision blurred. Something swam in the steaming fluid. He jumped up from his chair, and knocked the vessel aside. Cheetara quickly sidestepped the flying meal. "That's it!" Panthro shouted. "Get out of here now before I throw you out!" The light glinted menacingly off the spikes of his bandoliers.

The malevolent vibration increased. Tygra grabbed his temples and collapsed.

Water covered him as he fought to stay afloat to no avail. So this is how it ends, he thought, strangely calm as his lungs filled with the sea.

Tygra bolted upright in his bed. "Easy, it was only a bad dream," Cheetara said soothingly as she held his shaking shoulders.

Her spicy scent surrounded him. His mind cleared of its fright, but filled with a desire upon which he could not act. The cheetah filled out the orange leotard in all the right places. He was grateful that a blanket covered his nakedness and his arousal. Panthro and he had agreed long ago that one day Cheetara would become the mate of the Lord of the Thundercats. She was not

for them. Too harshly, he pushed her away, and watched her light eyes darken with a sadness he could not fathom.

Shame replaced lust. "I am sorry," he said, and the effort cost him dearly. He dropped back clutching his head. The weird murmur slithered through his mind and formed words he almost understood. Tears sprung from his eyes. Am I going mad! he thought with horror.

He never had the chance to answer himself. The cheetah stuck him with a needle. "Go back to sleep, Tygra," she said.

Sedative, the scientist in him thought with approval. Her form wavered into a mass of white and gold before the darkness overtook him once more. The blackness gave way to the sea. A cyclopean beast, a sleeping corruption resting in the tenebrous depths, had awakened. It eyed him hungrily.

Tygra shrieked in terror, but no one heard him.

Sunlight. Must be morning. Warmth touched his face. Tygra opened his eyes. Panthro and Cheetara stared back at him. The disquieting dissonance remained.

He attempted to speak, but had no voice. Confused, he slowly sat up in his bed. It was his hands that he noticed first. His mouth opened in shock. Tygra threw aside his bed covers. His mind reeled with the sight of his patterned skin. The bile rose in his throat as he considered what his face must look like without fur and his lush mane.

"It's not as bad as it looks, Tygra," Panthro said reassuringly. "After all, it is only fur. It will grow back."

Cheetara added quickly, "For two days, we tried the Eye of Thundera's light to restore you, but that did not work."

"The Eye did not even tell us what had happened in the first place," Panthro growled in annoyance. The warrior put his hand on Tygra's shoulder. "Don't worry. Today Lion-o went to Mumm-Rana's pyramid for answers since she never responded to our summons."

He should not have gone alone! the architect protested in his mind, his wild gestures making no sense to his companions.

"Calm down, Tygra," Cheetara remarked quickly, misinterpreting his actions. Even the unicorn master is searching his tomes for a clue to your affliction."

"Are you sure Mumm-Ra did not spell you during the last battle?" Panthro inquired.

Tygra threw up his hands in frustration at his inability to communicate his greater concern for Lion-o. As for Mumm-Ra, the creature had not even seen his approach during the melee. That was how he had gotten the upper hand with his illusion of the Egyptian god the decrepit mummy feared: Anubis, scourge of the undead.

"Do you think you can manage to eat something?" Cheetara asked.

"Yes, once you get better, we don't want your uniform to fall off that skinny tiger hide," Panthro said with a chuckle.

The architect's agitated wave indicated that he was not hungry.

"Let him rest, Cheetara," Panthro said unexpectedly. Without another word, the pair departed as if called away by an unseen visitor.

A light breeze blew through the slightly open window in his chamber. His skin tingled uncomfortably. A ball of light suddenly floated at the edge of the bed. Mumm-Rana's bandage-cowled face considered him with pity. There would be no respite from his affliction.

Her telepathic thoughts fought against the vile music which had intensified so that several malicious tones now pierced his brain. Whatever knowledge she wish to pass to him could not get through the inharmonic barrier.

What must I do! he implored, his thoughts caged within his head.

The light vanished.

Tygra wrapped the blanket around himself, and made for the door. Weakness gripped his legs, but he pushed forward, sensing that the answer resided beyond the walls of Cats' Lair.

He found himself on the steps of the fortress. He looked up at the great feline head, and felt a surge of pride. What he had designed would have to be legacy enough.

He crossed the courtyard and stood at the foot of the bridge that spanned the chasm, and the powerful river beneath. He looked down. Creatures darted beneath the rapidly flowing water. He could discern fins and faces. Arms rose up. Captivating voices insisted he dive down into the water where he belonged. Vampire mermaids. Each one sang of the love they would give him. Each one lied.

His hands began to hurt more than his head. Tygra studied his fingers with nauseous astonishment at the changes that unfolded. Webbing appeared between each digit. Sharp pain gripped his neck. It was getting hard to breathe.

"Tygra!" He whipped around. Cheetara raced to his side.

"You must come back inside," she said, her alto voice colored with fright. Despite his sickness he could still overpower her with his size and strength if he chose.

Instead, he ran his finger down her cheek and felt the wetness a tear had produced. He knew what he had to do even as her face registered her disgust at the hideous metamorphosis that had begun. Obliterating his terror with raw courage, Tygra flung himself into the chasm before she could stop him.

Her screams of despair followed him down until he knew no more.

That he had awakened surprised him. The ghastly drone that had infected his brain had stopped. Tygra attempted to move, and found it impossible. Chains of gold bound him to a great rock. Spires of crystal reflected back his alien image. Iridescent scales covered his form. Delicate gills in his neck fluttered with sea water as he respired. Bone pikes impaled six vampire mermaids. What had been their offense he wondered absently. A squamous figure like himself swam above him. It wore a crown sculpted with nightmares. It smiled showing serrated teeth.

Filth washed over his brain as the Deep One traced his torso with its claws. Desire rose within Tygra as his body responded to the fact that his tormentor was female, his phallus pulsing. She indicated the dead. *One infiltrated your mind. Her barb remained even as she died. Your weakness opened the path to our wishes. They served us, but instead they sought to take you for their own in revenge. Foolish, inferior creatures of lust. They would have raped you, then devoured you. But you were destined for glory. You will restore the Great Old One,* she hissed telepathically. The Deep One pointed to a sculpture of an massive being. Its bulbous eyes overpowered its tentacled face, but consciousness eluded it. Its expression was vacant, as if it dreamt of another universe. The vast creature's wings folded upon its mountainous back. Its clawed hands grasped for something beyond time and space. **Cthulhu fhtagn*. You will return the Great Old One to us, and this world will be ours once more.*

She put a jeweled dagger to his throat, its hilt covered with repulsive, thrusting figures that mocked all decency. *Your soul will feed the blade. The blade will sunder the binding spell.*

Other Deep Ones emerged from behind the rocks and the crystals, haphazardly arranging themselves on the sea floor. All began chanting, "*Phnglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn*." He understood the sibilant tones that had plagued him, and had magically fostered his transformation: *In his house at R'lyeh dead Cthulhu waits dreaming*. His heart pounded, craving to serve the monstrosity his death would restore.

No! A tiny flicker of the Thundercat he had been refused to surrender although he knew that he had lost everything. I will not go willingly! Tygra thundered to himself. As long as his heart remained pure he could stop the ritual. He did not know how far away Cats' Lair was. He recited the secret mantra his father had given to him on the day he had opened to his mind power, words of last resort. Something within the folds of his brain opened with a clarity he had never before

experienced. With a single blast of mind power, he summoned the Sword of Omens for the salvation of the world.

Victory came in a flood of power that illuminated his body. The golden chains blew apart. Several Deep Ones fell dead; the remaining creatures lunged forward. Tygra rose.

He would never be going home, but his world, and all that he valued, would be safe. His incandescent mind roared, *Justice! Truth! Honor! Loyalty!* As the Deep Ones descended upon him, Tygra slashed his throat with his claws. His soul journeyed beyond harm.

Chapter End Notes:

It never ends well in the Chthulu mythos. You either go mad, die or both.