Timestream

Part 1

By Knight Writer

Though the sun rode at its apogee in the pale blue of Third Earth's sky and the air was filled with the sounds of laughter and merriment, Cheetara's smile felt more wooden by the moment. She stood in place in the square of the largest of the Wollo villiages, eyes searching the milling crowds as they traded, drank, and danced about the fountain which marked the center of their town. Banners of a multitude of cheery colors flapped lazily in the slight summer breeze, members of the various races of Third Earth ate and chatted, even Snarf was haggling at a produce stall featuring the various Berbil foodfruits. All was as it should be.

"So, what am I feeling?" she muttered to herself as the sensation drew nearer. It was an unformed thing, a nagging presence at the edge of her untrained sixth sense. It was neither malevolent nor benevolent, just... "Implacable," she whispered.

"Cheetara," she heard Lion-O say. She turned to face him, a sweet iced treat in each hand with one proffered to her. "You okay?"

"It's nothing," she said at length. She idly wondered if it were the result of her cycle starting up, the buildup to which could sometimes be severe enough to muddle her psionic sense, but that was still weeks away. She reached out to accept the confection...

Only to have that strange pressure on her mind increase exponentially. She froze, seeing in her mind's eye a blackness that was deeper than night washing over the sky, the land, the people, nauseating and violent as it raided her mind and...

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I have to find safety, Cheetara thought while the pangs of hunger grew more insistent. The rubble was overgrown with weeds and wildflowers, tall grasses that offered sweet concealment. Mutant patrols had found the last safe haven she and Willa had managed to locate, and more good people had been lost. Willa among them. She forced back bitter tears at the thought of her dear friend's sacrifice, yet another in a long line of needless deaths.

Things had been good for awhile, so much so that she had kept back her dire feeling that the crash landing of their ship had been a portent. To her lasting horror, her intuition had been

proven right. One by one, they had fallen, all that was left was her. Every day, hiding from the enemy she had once fought ferociously. Every night, foraging for what little food could be scavenged. Her frame was thin rather than lean and taut, hunger and fear and shame constant companions.

She cringed at the sound of the nearby Skycutter passing overhead, flattening herself into the weeds as though to become one with the earth itself. Another thought that plagued her when her resolve was weak. It would be so easy, she would sometimes think in the hours of night that were darkest of all. They had all been caught, the lucky ones killed outright, yet she survived. The Skycutter flew on, the pilot seemingly oblivious to her presence. Running and hiding, it chafed at her warrior's pride, galled her to no end in spite of the near-constant despair. They had lost. There was no hope left.

Which did nothing to explain why she stubbornly remained alive when what she wanted more and more was to join her friends, all the ones lost from Thundera's destruction. Something deep within her core remained unbroken, deeper than any sense of pride or pain.

It's wrong, she thought. It's all wrong.

She had voiced this to Willa several weeks previous, only to hear her reply, "What in the name of the spirits ISN'T wrong these days?" Cheetara had seen no choice but to cede the arguement. Even so, it still nagged at her, that feeling. She couldn't shake it, couldn't escape it, yet still could not define it. Her memories were real, no amount of torment and loss could have been dreamt up by any sane mind, but still wrong.

She nearly rose when her instincts clamored a warning and the usual icy ball of dread made itself known once more, a feeling of eyes upon her.

"She's a cagey one," he said as the Heads Up Display on the inner visor of his helmet clearly identified the Thunderian woman he had come to find.

"Given how she's survived this hellhole," the realistic voice of the AI system which rode along with his suit of smartarmor and the systems of the all-terrain combat cycle beneath him, "you expected her to be naive?"

"Funny, Ajax," he replied. "Got a track on that... what the hell is it again?"

"Skycutter," Ajax said, "and yes. It's still sniffing around. I'm also detecting a bunch of Mutants in the near vicinity."
"Numbers and armaments?"
"About eighty, and light energy weapons. Ion blasters, mostly."
"Nasty in those numbers," he said.
"Well, the bike isn't the most heavily armored thing in the world," Ajax said.
"She's a rugged little bitch, and she's plenty fast. Distance to Door Point."
"Just over one hundred seventy kilometers, and over nice flat ground. Y'know, the kind without a hell of a lot of cover."
"But where we can go flat-out."
"And so can she. She might not be in top shape, but she's plenty fast. So, kemosabe, what's the plan?"
"Working on it." Ajax remained silent for several moments.
"That's what I love about working with you," the AI said, deadpan, "how utterly well prepared you are."
"Bite me."
"If I had teeth, I might be tempted... wait... Oh, shit."
"What?"
"That ape just got sight of her."
"Shit."
"You're tellin' me! Intercepting radio transmission." The black-clad man checked the gagues on his cycle as he brought the systems to power and readied the weapons.
"FOUND THE BITCH!" the rough voice hooted.
"Good, yesss!"
"What's with the hissing?"
"That would be the one called Slythe," Ajax reported as more chatter flew over the airwaves.
"All unitsss, converge! Monkian, flush her out!"
"She's mine..."
"NO WAY!" a snivelling voice cried over the circuit. "You got the Puma woman! It's MY turn!"
The powerful engine hummed to life as he shoved it in gear.
"Jussst catch her, you morons! OUT!"

"Force her into a killbox," he said as he sent the bike rocketing forward.
"With that kind of insight, you could set up shop with a turban and a crystal ball," Ajax said.
"Do me a favor and stop with the antiquated references."
"And after that?"
"Prep a seeker and target that sky-thing."

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Cheetara bit off a curse as she pushed her weary legs to super speed. It came far slower of late, her muscles burning before she even reached her - considerably lower - top speed. She prayed it would serve her one more time as the Skycutter bore down on her. It was a spotter for ground forces, she knew, and had radioed her position. Her only option was to run...
She glanced back at the sound of crumpling metal to find a greasy black cloud where the Skycutter bearing what had to be Monkian once was. She didn't allow herself to consider the source of this unexpected good fortune and demanded more from her weary, weakened legs. Grasses and trees blurred past, far more slowly than she would have liked, and open grasslands greeted her.

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"What the fuck?" Vultureman said as he consulted his handscanner. "Monkian's Skycutter just vanished!"
"Good riddance," Slythe growled. "I never liked the fucker anyway."
"I don't read any incoming ballistics," Vultureman muttered, worried. Slythe tuned him out.
"Jackalman, prepare the Thundrainium field. This one won't escape us again!"
"I've already put our men in position," Jackalman said with a leer. "We get Cheetah ass tonight!"
"Surrounded by idiots and perverts," Slythe grunted.
"Gay." Slythe whirled on Jackalman.
"Repeat that to my face," he snarled, his reptillian voice dangerously low. Jackalman remained silent. "I thought ssso."

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"If you have a plan," Ajax said as they bike roared over slightly hilled land, "I'd love to hear it!"
"We're still on a paralell course?"
"Well, duh." He eased up on the throttles. "What are you doing?"
"Classic ambush," he replied. "They're gonna slam the door behind her."
"And we're slowing down BECAUSE?!"
"Any more air units incoming?"
"Not for about forty minutes."
"Plenty of time. Prep the smoke rounds."
"So THAT'S your plan!"
"Never said I had one."
"I really hate improv."

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Cheetara tripped as the wave of nausea hit her, the hard earth scraping the myraid areas of exposed skin as she tumbled over the unforgiving surface. A thundrainium field, damn them! She tumbled end over end to land in a scraped and bruised heap with Mutants of all types surrounding her. This was it, then. Her time had come. She began to shut herself down, to close out the thoughts of what those bastards had done to her friends, her own people. Beneath that, though, was peace. It would be painful, it would be humiliating beyond measure, but it would be an end. It came as a relief before a furious buzzing reached her ears which grew into a roar. Slythe appeared, his clawed hand raking over the tatters of her uniform to leave her breasts exposed. She lacked the energy to cover them, the will to care. Despair had won out in the end. She was theirs, now, and she had best get used to the idea of being raped to death. At least, she thought, there would be no pain afterward.
The roar grew into a shriek, and she dimly looked over her shoulder at the approaching cloud of dust.

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"Smoke rounds!" he shouted as the cycle raced forward, "Medium altitude, maximum spread!"
"She's gonna get a good dose..."
"NOW!"
"Right."

Streaks of gas shot out from the rapidly approaching form. Clouds of white burst from above, leaving all caught below hacking and gagging.
"GAS!" Slythe bellowed between coughs. Her chest burned as the roar grew even louder and a black shape pierced the cloud. The rear wheel spun in and arch which knocked Mutants off their feet for the sleek vehicle to stop alongside her. Each line of the rumbling machine was graceful, a front windguard curving back over the handlebars of the low-slung bike. Forward and backward facing ports sat flush with the gleaming metal surfaces which could only be armor, faint traces of gas wisping up from two of the frontal ports. The black-clad rider reached a hand down to her. Out of options, Cheetara accepted the hand and was pulled onto a saddle-like seat.
"Hold on," the male figure said before racing off again. The intense discomfort in her eyes and nasal passages faded quickly with the cloud. Lacking other options, along with the power of speech, Cheetara held on for dear life as the vehicle rocketed away.

"NOSEDIVERS!" Slythe shouted into what he hoped was the radio microphone, "AFTER THEM!" He collapsed into another fit of coughing.

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The plains of the Sulfur Desert marked their trail by a shrinking line of flame as the cycle raced full-out over the flammable surface. Cheetara held tightly to him, trusting him at least to get her to safety. It was a start.
"Crap," Ajax said over the comm circuit.
"Uninvited guests?" he asked.
"Nosedivers. We might be in some trouble."
"Which is why I picked this route."
"About that. Explanation, please?"

"Ready the cluster rounds."
"Oh," Ajax said after a few moments. "Planning to turn this place into a nuclear fireball?"
"Sans the fallout," he replied before switching to an open channel. "You okay back there?!" he shouted over the high-pitched shriek of the combat cycle. He felt her nod against his back. To Ajax, he said, "I don't remember them having so many vehicles."
"The times, boss, they have a-changed. See what I did there?"
"Are the clusters prepped?"
"You are a one-man tough room. I suggest activating the EAS just after launch. Oh, and shooting these things off before those Nosedivers get into firing range."
"You would have served Napoleon well," he said as he toggled the firing graphic in the HUD then the Emergency Accelleration System shortly after. "Listen, Cheetara," he exclaimed, "this ride is about to get real bumpy! Hold on tight!" She responded by giving the old college try to crushing his ribs. A rearview image popped up in the HUD, showing several Nosedivers tearing across the desert after them, able to avoid igniting the sands by hovering several inches above the surface. With a fierce grin, he toggled the launch option.
The twin canisters shot clear of their tubes via compressed gas just before he activated the EAS. The pressure against him increased by what felt like twofold - which would have felt like eightfold without the inertial dampeners that automatically activated aside the EAS - and the already blurring landscape became utterly indistinct. The rear image showed the fat cylindrical canisters tip over to release several glimmering ball bearings whose purpose was to perforate unprotected flesh. Some even did, yet most did what he'd actually intended.
Flames spurted up from the impacts of hundereds of tiny projectiles, which merged into larger flames, then into an inferno. Nosediver fuel tanks exploded, adding more flames and shrapnel which caused more of the sands to ignite. A raging wall of flame erupted into existence which nothing could pass through unscathed let alone still living, and reached for the fleeing motorcycle with greedy tendrils. The flames drew slowly closer, his heart hammering in his chest, until the wheels cleared the flammable sands to find hardpack beneath them The EAS deactivated, its power drained, and the cycle eased back to normal speeds.

Slythe could only gape and the firey armaggeddon which the Sulfur Desert had become. Even from hundreds of feet away, the heat was so intense as to bake the precious moisture from his

scaled hide.
"No one could have survived that," Jackalman said, his voice a fearful gasp.
"Don't be sssso ssssure," Slythe replied. "Cheetara issss quite resssourceful. Vultureman!" he shouted, turning to the bird-like Mutant, "how soon can you get your Flying Machine here?!"
"It'll be about an hour by remote control, but do you..."
"Yessss, I do," Slythe said, cutting him off.
"I have to object, here," Vultureman replied. "We don't know what other tricks that man has up his sleeve. If we take the Flying Machine..."
"What the fuck do you want ussss to do? Go AROUND?! If we wait, the trail will go cold!"
"If we go in with only one fighting vehicle, one shot will take us ALL out!" Vultureman yelled. "This one was willing to turn the Sulfur Desert into just shy of a nuclear blast! THINK about it!"
Slythe turned his gaze back to the inferno, refusing to openly admit that the buzzard had a point. Though the unknown man had helped the last surviving ThunderCat, he had used tactics that any Mutant would be proud of. Any Mutant who had the balls of a brave warrior and not the shrivelled raisins of a coward, he ammended.
"Ten to one odds they're extra crispy right now," Jackalman said, though Slythe knew his casual tone was only to hide his cowardice. "He had to have been desperate! Who wouldn't be with so many Nosedivers in pursuit?"
"We'll go around, see if we can pick up a trail," he said, irked at having to follow the advice of a lesser Mutant like Vultureman. "Even if it goesss cold, she can't hide forever."
"Why is Mumm-Ra so insistent on us killing her?" Vultureman mused. "What kind of credible threat is she? One woman against all of us?"
"Would you rather it be that demon against so few of ussss?!" Slythe bellowed. "He didn't exactly grant ussss an army! We'll run her to ground, ssssooner or later, yesss!"

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The remainder of the ride had passed in relative silence that brought Cheetara no peace. Though the man whome she clung to had come to her aid, she had no idea why or even who he was. Gratitude warred with paranoia as their destination neared.
"The Crystal Canyon?" she asked over the now-lower sounds of the motorcycle's powerful

engine.
"Perfect place," he replied. "The crystals and the sharp angles will make Mutant search radar useless, and it'll be hours before they can get past that fireball we left them."
"They'll follw the trail we left right to us!" she shouted. "You weren't very subtle about making a bee-line right to this place!"
"Just trust me, okay?"
"Right now, I only trust two people. One's dead and the other isn't you," she spat as the wickedly sharp spires of the canyon surrounded them. The engine quieted even further as they rolled deeper into its depths.
"You trusted me once today."
"Because I thought you presented a better option than death by gang rape," she replied tersely.
"One person I can fight off." He fell silent as he guided the motorcycle through the twists and turns of Crystal Canyon to a sight that gripped her solid.
A square in the manner of an entrance, bordered by absolutely nothing, came into view. The floor leading into its depths was divided by a single recessed trench which the bike's wheels fit easily into with a little room to spare. The air immediately felt colder as they passed into the space, gleaming metal walls replacing the crystalline monoliths. Cheetara looked back to see a sturdy pair of doors slide from recessed ports in the entryway to slam closed with dreadful finality. The machine rolled forward a bit further until sections of the floor opened to reveal disc shaped clamps which sealed themselves over the wheels to hold it upright. She bounded off the bike before he dismounted, furious at herself for letting such a surreal sight override her honed instincts. She faced him, seeing her reflection in the mirrored faceplate of his helmet, and tried to rearrange the tatters of her leotard to at least somewhat cover her breasts.
A construct of golden light appeared to his right, humanoid and androgynous, staring at her with large sapphire eyes. It cast its gaze from the man, to her, several times.
"Well, you got her here," the construct said. "Go get a cookie, boss."
"Who are you?!" she demanded. The man and the hologram traded a look and a shrug before the former removed his helmet. His skin was of olive hue, markings similar to that of her own clan over his eyes. Chestnut hair hung in a bound tail at the back of his head. An aquiline nose rested between golden feline eyes and a smirking mouth. He resembled a Thunderian in most ways, she noticed.

"My name is Jarvis Riggs," he said. "This is my AI partner, Ajax."
"Hiya."
"Well, your friend is right," she snarled, "you got me here. Now what? Some sort of reward?" She spat the last out in disgust.
"Only if that reward is you giving me a chance," Jarvis said earnestly.
"I let myself get locked away in whatever this place is with a trail that'll lead Slythe right to the damn door! If you want a chance, you've screwed it up big time!"
"Actually," the image called Ajax said, "they won't find the door. The entry point to the Chronoslip is already back in subspace."
"How nice," she snarled. "If that lightbulb's telling the truth, I'm trapped in here!"
"Protected..."
"I've heard that before." She saw Jarvis take in a deep breath and release it with a tired sigh. "The first sign of a silver lining, and I mistake a rescue for a kidnapping."
"You're not a captive."
"Really? Then let me go!"
"Cheetara, listen, you need me..."
"Great pickup line. Try it at a bar sometime."
"And I need you. I need your help." Those words gave her pause long enough for her to erupt in derisive laughter.
"I don't know where you've been, but ThunderCats haven't been in a position to help anyone for a long damn time!"
"You're in a positiion to help," Jarvis said. "Your friends. Your people. Yourself."
"My dead friends, my dead people, my trapped self. If you wanna try and take what you see here, you bastard, bring it on!"
"I know what you feel," Jarvis said, his golden eyes hard as his voice.
"You have no idea..."
"You know this is all wrong."
"I don't see how any of this could be right!" she cried, her anger growing.
"You feel it on the level you feel your visions coming on," Jarvis said, eyes locked solidly on hers. Cheetara fell silent at hearing those words. "It's always there, never revealing itself, constantly nagging at you."

"Shut up," Cheetara said, the weakness in her words tasting like bile on her lips.

"All that you remember is true," Jarvis continued.

"SHUT UP!"

"But ever fiber of your being screams that it's all wrong."

"STOP IT!" Pain wanted to grow into a nuclear cloud behind her eyes.

"What if I told you that what you feel is absolutely correct?" A deep cold quenched the fires of anger in her belly at that, spreading to the tips of her fingers and toes.

"What...?" she croaked. "How... how could you know that?"

"Willing to hear me out, now?" Jarvis asked.

"I...."

"Just follow Ajax," Jarvis said. "You'll probably want a shower and some clean clothes. I'll explain everything at dinner." With that, Jarvis turned and walked to the nearest doorway which opened and then shut behind him.

"This way," the hologram named Ajax said. Cheetara followed, numb from what she had just heard. "What the hell have I gotten myself into?"

"A hot shower for starters," Ajax replied. "We can go into the rest from there." Cheetara followed him through seemingly endless corridors before arriving at one of several dozen nondescipt doors.